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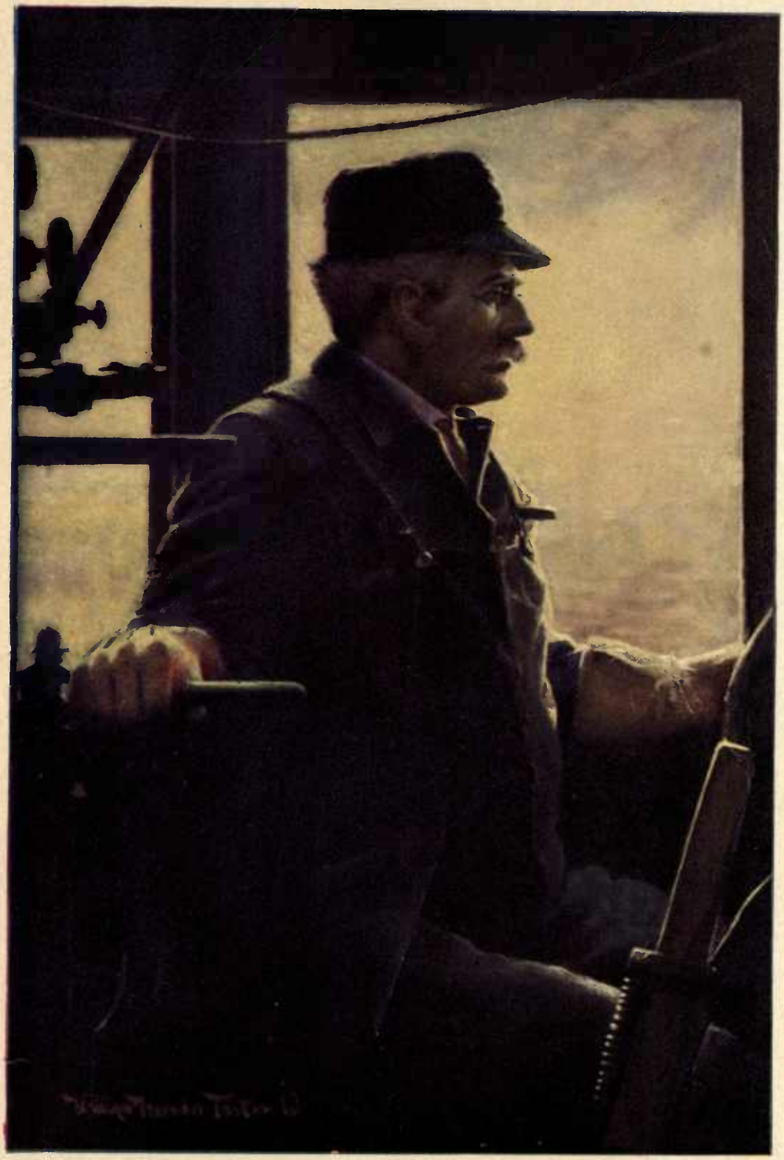
MARK D. DERBY, ENGINEER

MARK ENDERBY: ENGINEER



The steady brain and eye and hand of Enderby played upon them as confidently as a trained hand plays upon a well-strung harp.

MARK ENDERBY
ENGINEER

BY

ROBERT FULKERSON HOFFMAN

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS BY
WILLIAM HARNDEN FOSTER

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1910

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TO

Men who know the cunning of the desert,
  Men who meet the sun upon the height,
Men who ride in thunder-tones of storm winds,
  Men who know the voices of the night.

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MARK ENDERBY: ENGINEER

CHAPTER I

A PEACEFUL DAY'S RUN

"ALL the world loves a lover," twittered a little woman who stood with her friends just below the cab window of Mark Enderby's engine.

She set her hat straighter upon her head, she believed, and patted her back hair until it suited her imagination, meanwhile smiling benignly after John Parry and his young wife whom she had never before seen and whom she probably never saw again. They, making their way self-consciously down the platform, were evidently embarking upon a life adventure by way of Mark Enderby's train. That he should one day bear a part in the weaving of darker woof upon this bright strand of warp in the railroad's giant loom was quite beyond his present seeing, for Enderby knew the glad young people not at all.

The little group beneath the cab window dissolved into the hurrying throngs in the big train-shed, and if the chance repetition of the old saw which, perhaps, holds more of jingle than of truth, made any impression upon Mark's faculties he gave no outward sign of it. True, a brighter gleam may have lighted his eyes for an instant as he continued to look back along the train, but, passing that, he took no more notice of the speaker or the young folks than of the hundreds of others who were parts of the animated scene.

Coming directly to the point, Enderby, in some respects, was disappointing as a locomotive engineer, but, in reality, there are many undiscovered Enderbys. That is to say, he was not down on the platform before a group of admiring passengers, doing unnecessary oiling; or feeling of the driving axle centres with the back of his hand to learn if they had run hot, when he knew that the engine had been standing in the roundhouse for the last ten hours; nor was he loosening needle-feeds in the oil cups in order to look profoundly at them and tighten them up again, when they were all right in the beginning. In short, Mark never made a play to the grandstand and would not have known how to go about it. He made his important preparations at the roundhouse.

When he got the signal he was watching for, he withdrew his calm-eyed old visage into the cab and, with an after-dinner sigh, dropped his hand caressingly upon the brake-valve and released the brakes. He looked out again for the answering signal from the far end of the dusky train-shed. It came, and when he settled comfortably upon his cushion, his young fireman was fuming about a leaking flue and had just succeeded in kicking the fire-door shut in a way that did not at all comport with his good-natured face.

"Billy, did you hear what the little lady said of you?" queried Enderby. "Think she ever heard of Nora, out on the mountain?"

"Not about me," said stalwart Billy Bane, with emphasis. "I can improve upon it, though: 'All the world kicks a kicker'— or ought to. If that man at the roundhouse would quit kicking and calk flues, we could do better on this run, with less coal charged against us. This flat country is easy, but I 'd rather fight the mountain."

"Don't kick, Billy," counselled Enderby, with much gravity. "We do pretty well sometimes. Promotion coming, then the mountain!"

Billy grinned guiltily and climbed upon his seat-box to wait for the starting signal. When they got it, and the shrill treble of the little air-whistle in the cab died away, Enderby opened the throttle as gently as one might draw upon a softly opened door; and, as gently, the engine at first responded.

There is a moment that is dear to the heart of an engineer and yet it is one in which the engine, to the inexperienced onlooker, seems to fail of its promise of strength. It is that moment in which the eye of the man in the cab is fixed upon the floor, or the earth, at the side of the track, and the forward movement of the engine is so slight that only that view will reveal it to him. It is the actual beginning of the day's run.

They drew out through the wide-arching mouth of the train-shed, into the afternoon sun, and crossed, from lead to lead, down through the teeming city yard. Curving his able body above the clacking reverse lever Enderby drew its resisting length up for quicker speed and latched it safe and high in the quadrant. Joy and hope, despair and failure, young life and the quiet dead; a magistrate, late from his ermine, and a madman, bound; the wealth of a kingdom, in golden bars in the express car, only a car's length from the cluttered possessions of a party of bewildered immigrants,— all of these trailed in the lee of the big engine. All of them, to him, were the train. It was his to move them, swift and sure, to deliver them up where desired, or, at farthest, at the station one hundred and fifty miles across the prairie, that to him differed from all other stations, because it was home — though the mountains were calling, calling.

The city fell behind like a swiftly rolled canvas of neutral tints and they curved around the southern shore of Lake Michigan, where surf-caps rolled white upon the tawny beach and seemed to fall away brokenly among the sand pines. A touch of the hand upon the brake-valve, now and then, to steady the long line of coaches upon the curves; the expiring sigh of release, upon the tangent; the momentary stammering of the exhaust while a yielding but sure grip reset the fighting reverse lever; the firm, almost imperceptible play of the hand upon the throttle; the quickening speed; again, the grinding restraint upon the smooth running wheels, until the signal-arms beckoned them onward. These were the animating forces that controlled the fate of the hurrying cavalcade of wheels with its motley burden of life, and the steady brain and eye and hand of Enderby played upon them as confidently as a trained hand plays upon a well-strung harp.

The run was on and he was composedly a part of it, as silent, serene, and alone as though in the heart of a forest. Ruled by the primal laws of compensation in nature, Enderby's mind was instinctively working its own economies. An otherwise unbearable physical hurt brings numbness that is near to physical comfort. A crushing mental shock often gives mental quiet like that of deep peace. An accustomed tumultuous world of sound eventually gives mental concentration that sharpens every faculty, gives alertness for the hearing and sight of the unusual, and leaves the mind free to deal chiefly with that.

Thus Enderby ran placidly on, reading signals, home and distant, distant and clear, and Billy worked methodically upon the deck, rejoicing in the decreasing leak and finding anew that trouble is sometimes worse in the offing than when it comes nearer, to be vanquished.

Towns and hamlets arose out of the beautiful flats of the prairie, took on a momentary importance, and slowly sunk into the low distance behind the flying train. The bell sang its musical crooning note and the whistle droned across the wide spaces, where no hill sent back its voice, and the smiling land received them with a wide-flung welcome, as in days gone, and with happy promise for the days to come.

Now and again, at the vanishing point of the tracks ahead, an atom of black indented the low and level sky-line. Slowly, for a time, it lifted its deceptive bulk more clearly into Enderby's field of sight. Then, swiftly, with breathless haste, it loomed a menacing, rushing hulk of power and fierce action, with wide-trailing plumes of white and black and swirling gray. It bore down upon him, and he upon it, with a resistless, final plunge and loud-voiced shouting. And, just when crashing impact and annihilation seemed most near and complete, the big engine of a plodding freight or speeding express shot safely past him in parallel and left with Enderby only a brief and vivid memory of the striking of a single clear note from an engine bell which seemed, instantly, to have struck and sunk to unfathomable depths in the ocean of sound that surged steadily in his keenly attuned ears.

Once, toward evening, a galloping horse attached to a wildly rocking buggy raced up a country lane between the green hedges, to contest with the engine for the moment of crossing. The space between them narrowed, narrowed, closer and closer, until a flying curtain waved like a victorious banner, from the rear of the outfit, after it had safely won the crossing by an instant's lead, the exultant occupant unaware that, but for Enderby's slight movement at the brake-valve, the little comedy would have been, instead, a thing for his friends to weep over.

When the train stopped at a village that boasted the name of "Victory" upon its small station board, a little company awaited the home-coming of the silent passenger in the baggage car. With bared heads they walked haltingly under the weight which the train gave up to them and, sliding it reverently into the waiting, mud-stained spring-wagon by the track, they placed a seat across it and thus rode away with the great city's contribution to the quiet village churchyard.

In silence, Enderby and Billy watched the speaking scene and, when they started on again, the hand upon the throttle drew it open with a kindly touch, the bell, under Billy's steady hand, seemed to sound a slower note, and the mournful chime of the whistle, across all of that broad country, to bear a deeper significance.

But the extra minutes used in the stop were to be regained, and Enderby went calmly about it, touching, adjusting, urging, restraining; until the long line of coaches again followed its flying leader in steady flight, and sailed around the wide curves with the grace of a hawk in air.

Duly, they delivered the pair of cooing doves who, apparently, were supposed to be living upon showers of rice, and in due time the judge strode away in majesty, up the shaded street of a suburban puddle in which he was, perhaps, the biggest toad. Turning at the curb, from daily habit, he waved a paternal farewell to Billy, much as one might say "Your greatest work is done, my son. Now run along to your supper." And Billy, strong in the habit grown of another viewpoint, waved a polite adieu and turned with merry eyes to meet Enderby's slow smile as he fixed for the far-reaching miles ahead.

Where the tracks spanned the deep and rocky bed of a clear babbling stream, and broad smooth-clipped lawns sloped up among tall firs to a secluded city of refuge upon a swelling knoll of the prairie, they came to a halt with no ring of bell or sound of whistle. There the madman, with hands encased, and unseeing eyes, stalked with his watchful retinue up the knoll singing, over and over again, a plaintive refrain. It struck a quavering chord with the low notes which Billy drew from the bell at starting, until it wavered away with the man's receding figure among the trees and was swallowed up in the thickening exhaust of the engine. The open book of the day's run lay again before Enderby, who was looking steadfastly ahead upon the track. And, far and wide upon the great steel web of track that has reclaimed the wilderness and made of it at once the noblest workshop and playground of the world, a host of other Enderbys were reading, understandingly, without qualm of fear or wide-eyed haste, other familiar pages of the daily story of the track; the vivid, common story of a common day, although from pages which are ever changing with the moments,— reading, and casting surely the giant shuttles which, most of all, are weaving the mantle of destiny for the race of men.

The sleeping country roads were growing more marked in the slanting rays of the sun, and the engine crooned a deep, low monotone through the wooded places, as she fled across the long level. Through the busy, teeming hours she rocked, and steadied, and plunged ahead, climbing rises in loud-voiced triumph among rugged oaks and again, chanting a low requiem over the straight and silent places.

Where the prairie was dotted by widely grouped cottages in the distance, the train again stopped. Some new-formed Arcadia welcomed the care-worn immigrants. They turned their tired faces, eager-eyed, into the reddening rays of the sinking sun, shouldering their crude luggage from the baggage car, with many lowly bows and hat-tippings, and trailing away into their new land of promise, to claim, late, a manhood they had never known.

The hands of the big illuminated clock in the station were drawing close to seven of the evening, and the piercing rays of the big torch, high upon the City Hall Tower, were flashing farewell signals after the departing sun, when the train came hurrying steadily out of the darkening maze of the afterglow, across the waving fields, and thrust itself into the narrow throat of the terminal yards. It glided into the lighted gloom of the big station exactly at seven, by the hands upon the glowing dial high upon the wall beyond the ends of the tracks. A final vibrant hiss from the brake-valve spoke sharply to the engine looming large toward the guard-post which stood directly in its path. Slower and slower, the menacing engine crept nearer the obstruction until, in the last forward turn of the wheels, Enderby set the brake-valve handle to full release, and the train was still and free, without a demurring lurch; free, as it had been through the living hours, in the freedom of a sure control.

All was quiet for a moment, except the regular pulsing of the air-pump. Then the station renewed its murmur of restrained life, so like the murmur of a shell from the sea. There came a group of men who took the golden treasure from its car and away. The hurrying throng flowed by, unnoting and unnoted. The day's run of the train was finished.

A little later, a placid-faced woman looked up in the failing light, from among the flowers in an old-fashioned dooryard, as the gate-latch clicked under Enderby's hand.

"You are sure as the sun, Mark," she said. "Was it a pleasant run to-day?"

"Like canoeing on the river in June, mother," he answered. "Where is Ruth?"

"Placing supper upon the table. She was with me here until she saw her wonderful father coming."

Her cool, firm hand slipped into the strong and gentle clasp of Enderby as she smiled up contentedly into his eyes, and yet, a shade of longing sat deeply upon her face.

"Suppose we tie up those nasturtiums in the morning, mother," he laughingly suggested.

"I was thinking of that when you came," she said, "and, oh, father, I have been thinking of the mountains to-day, our Alta Vista, Villa Rica mountains! Shall we ever go back to them? In another year, when Ruth's schooling is finished? Could we?"

"Why, mother, you have said the thing I wanted to say!" he replied, as his arm passed gently about her. "We have been very happy here, but the mountains are always calling. Well, we shall see. Another year, maybe, and then we might be able to arrange it."

Thus, in a contentment that lacked but the nearness of the mountains for these mountain-bred folks, the seal was set upon a day's biography of a modest expert, and the forecast of others of his virile days was made.

CHAPTER II

AGAINST THE MOUNTAIN

ALTA VISTA, far south and high in the Rockies, most of the time lies smiling guardedly in the tempered sunshine of New Mexico; and for the rest of it, she has moods — which is one of the joys of Alta Vista.

While the June showers fall regularly of afternoons, she arouses sleepily as a peaceful babe; blue-eyed of the sky, white-capped of the clouds, gurgling with the voice of many quick-born rills. And when the ready sunlight races down again from the mountains and across the wide vistas, the wayfarer is electrified into close kinship with the heart of things, with the heart of Alta Vista, and he thrills with a sense of fellowship in the power to create. But, when the equinox shatters the peaks with lightning and the valleys quake with thunder, or the snows come rippling across the divide, to battle with alkali dust whirled up from the desert and dashed into Big Pass, Alta Vista crouches expectantly at the base of the Rim Rock Cliff and waits. News will come of the men in the mountains, and there is gruff greeting for him who does not know the ways of the high country.

Five hundred feet more above the virile little town rises the Rim Rock Cliff, its solemn face to the east, worn smooth by the wash of tides of long ago, or glaciers' rasping touch, and its sparsely wooded top seamed with coal, a stranger to the miner's pick. Gnarled cedars cluster thickly along the crevices, and lower there is a fringe of cottonwoods that seems to overhang the town. Sloping sharply from this base, Alta Vista stretches sinuously down a thousand yards to the railroad tracks and beyond the tracks half as far to a deep arroyo which divides the Mexican quarter, the Old Town, from the new. Clinging to the nearer rim of this deep dry ditch are the shops and roundhouses of the first mountain division, and near by are the little red station and despatcher's office, where " He " and his aides hear the wires sing fair or sing foul, and direct the battle by minutes. Alta Vista is well pleased with its four thousand souls and grudgingly includes Mexicans and half-breeds, but laughingly denies that burros figure in the corner drug-store revision of the census which easily proves that Paradise's rival pretensions as a county seat are " sure foolish."

Far to the south stretch wave upon wave and foothill upon foothill of gray-brown earth, past Starvation Peak, past Villa Rica, and farther than the eye can reach into the clear heights of the Glorietas, whose brooding purple depths give no hint of the struggles of Mexican and Spaniard, red man and white, Federal and Confederate, whose blood has variously dyed the thirsty earth upon the line of the old trail. At the farther side of the broad valley, six miles northeast from the Rim Rock Cliff, rises Neilson's *mesa,* a bold rampart of earthen reds and greens fused into cliffs that zigzag away to right and left, a day's journey for a laden burro. And topping that, where the moon is born at evening behind the ragged profile of the Geyser Peak, the great levels stretch away into a little-known wilderness of dead gray.

But none of these things justify the pretensions of Alta Vista. Her windrows of skeletons lying nakedly on the earth beyond the stock pens, where the utterly starved, the hopelessly maimed, the exhausted and dead are sorted from the living skeletons that are shipped through from the deeper Southwest each spring by suffering thousands, show that she is near the cruel cattle country; but she is not of it. Neither the cliff nor the skeleton-strewn valley, the *mesa,* nor the far reaches to the Glorietas, but the great pass in the Rim Rock Range made Alta Vista, and she is proud of her maker.

In a wide sweep to the north of the Geyser Peak the Rim Rock Range rises forbiddingly. Seven miles of winding through the pass, rising a thousand feet and curving like a maimed serpent, is crowned by a tunnel of half a mile cut through the crest into Colorado. Sixteen miles of writhing and turning in half-circles and steep-pitched elliptics, down sixteen hundred feet to the wide gate of the canyon, shows Sentinel straddling the noisy little Geyser Water and waiting, with coal, water, sand and human grit, for trouble; conquering it at catch-holds when it comes. There, Rankin's Rest calmly backs the town with five hundred feet of dull yellow cliff, and on its top Pioneer Rankin and his mate sleep grandly beneath a lonely finger of stone. Across the little creek, Vulcan Peak frowns down from its great height and faces away toward the Snowy Range and the Spanish Peaks, far to the right of which lies Crystal, eighty-five miles from Sentinel and two thousand feet lower, on the Arkansas. All of these point to the pass, and the pass made Alta Vista, quietly proud ordinarily, fiercely so sometimes, and yet smiling the dominant smile of the frontier headquarters of the mountain division; the steely smile of men who can go long hours on little food at times, with faces stiff from want of sleep, and laugh derisively, or curse and fight the mountains until they let freight into Alta Vista and pass it on to Villa Rica, to the Glorietas, to Balceta, the Tehachapies, and the western sea.

The call of the mountains had prevailed and the Enderbys, as well as Billy Bane, had returned to Alta Vista to fight the mountain in its savage moods and to bask and rejoice with body and soul in its more frequent sunny uplift.

In Crystal, on a November morning that promised fair, Billy, wearing the proud title of engineer, and fireman Jim Plinney blinked sleepily at the call-boy's lantern and looked approvingly through the open door at a red-hot stove in the boarding-house hall, as they sat up in bed to sign the call-book.

" What do we get, Zeke? " said Bane to the caller.

" First Fifty-one, at four-thirty this morning."

" Made up? "

" Making up; thirty loads, all refrigerators, track fourteen."

" What engine? " said Plinney.

" Big consolidation; the 700. She 's on the ashpit now with her flues a-leakin'."

" H-e-e-ll," Plinney drawled in disgust, and lolled back with his face to the wall.

" How late was Fifty-one getting in? " yawned Bane.

" On time."

" What time is it now, Zekey? "

" Three-forty-five. Git a move on you. I can't stay here all night with you fellers."

" Snow? " drawled Bane.

" Nope; fair. Moon gone down; dark now. Hold on there, don't you fellers go to sleep on me again. Come on now! The Old Man like to skinned me last time you was here, 'cause I did n't git the figgers to cinch you on when you held Second Fifty-one ten minutes. Put 'er in there now, will you?"

Bane signed for both, and growled, "We were out twenty hours on the trip before we overslept. There you are, sonny, now *vamose*. This is no bird cage."

"Well I only want wat 's —"

"*Vamose, hombre,*" repeated Plinney, and swung a threatening shoe as the door banged shut and Zekey went pattering and whistling down the stairs in search of other victims for the early morning. Then they laughed a tolerant laugh, as men do after they have learned to bear all things; yawned and were wide awake.

By 4:10 a. m. they had breakfasted, stumbled through the dark yards to the roundhouse, gone outside to the engine, and were uniformed in their comfortable faded blue overalls. Plinney had examined the leaking flues for prospects of a hard trip, doctored his fire, filled the signal-lamps, trimmed and lighted the headlight, fed water to the boiler, shut off the purring injector, and stood silently in the ruddy gloom of the engine cab with his back to the warmth of the boiler-head; while Bane, now boldly outlined in the flare of his torch, and now melting into the shadowy background, like the strong figure of an old Rembrandt, looking keenly here and there below, oiling, tightening, loosening, defaming in a subdued and satisfied way the pooled engine and all who believe in pooling, made ready for the start.

As he climbed into the gangway and blew out the flame of his torch a brakeman swung up after him with a crisp call of "Ready?" For answer, Bane nodded, shoved the cylinder-cock lever to open position with his foot, tried the air on the driver-brakes, and opened the throttle cautiously. The engine coughed up a ragged spurt of sooty water from the stack, hissed spitefully at the dark coal chutes in the shadows, close at hand, slipped viciously with an echoing roar, steadied down and moved off slowly toward the yards.

"Sassy this morning," said the brakeman.

"Yes, but it 's a bluff," said Plinney. "Look at her leak."

From the narrow throat at the end of the big yards, she reversed and crept backward down the ladder track indicated by a long diagonal line of bright green lights, shimmering close to the ground at intervals where the several tracks were intersected. Here and there, an imperative target of red showed the bullseye of a switch set to lead her onto Number Fourteen track, where a cluster of white lights shifted and twinkled at the head of the sullen-looking line of refrigerators. At 4:15, she settled back upon the head end of the thirty loads, with a subdued crash of the couplings that rippled away in decreasing rumblings toward the distant caboose. It was the wordless signal for one of the routine scenes of activity that leap from seeming unpreparedness in a railroad yard, and subside into the apparently vacant darkness, as a rocket leaps from its dull casing, sweeps through its fiery arc, subsides, and is gone. It is done, complete, dismiss it. What does the future hold?

Something more than the casting off of a ship's lines from the wharf, something less than the solemnity of the passing of a soul from earth, is in these early morning scenes in a railroad yard of a single-track line through the mountains of the high country. It puts the yearning, far-away look in the eyes of men who converse in monosyllables while they think of many secrets of the hill country; who laugh jerkily — if they laugh — as though the mystery of the mountains might sweep down and exact tribute of life for the infraction of the great rule of silence. The mystery that is written in the faces even of the wild things that live in the Land of Altitude, closes quickly all breaches of the silence that holds the barrens.

So, deft activity held sway for a time. Before the echoes had run out of the frozen yards, the air-hose had been snapped together, the air cut in, and the air-pump chugged hurriedly to replace what had been suddenly drawn from its store. A torch rose, wavered, and fell near the engine, and a resonant voice from the darkness said, " Set 'em." Bane, leaning from the window and looking toward the train, reached into the cab without turning, and the brakes set for test in response to the rasping discharge of the brake-valve.

On each side of the train a torch flared its way, searching slowly to the rear, and the inspectors signalled for release. Bane's hand moved silently a few inches in the dark cab. Each triple valve along the train whistled its keen expiring sigh and the iron shoes released their grip of the wheels. The air-pump chuckled wildly again into the night, a torch far to the rear flared a peremptory " All right," and vanished. Bane drew in his head to respond to conductor Waverly's greeting as he climbed up from the other side with orders.

" Hello, Bill! "

" Hello, Wavy! What you got? "

" Rights to Sentinel against first and second Fifty-two and Number Two will wait at Sinker's until 5:55 a. m. and at Badger until 6:15 a. m. Meet Extra 905 at the Dry Hole. Sign and let 's go. Make Sinker's, can't you? We don't want to stay at Badger till 6:15."

" Try it; but it 's close time and she 's leaking," said Bane, and signed, with Plinney reading over his shoulder the de-tails of the order which had been read in full by Bane while Waverly skilfully voiced the points that governed for the next few hours' work. Waverly dropped from the gangway remarking as a polite afterthought, " How are you, Jim? " and Plinney replied, " How are you, Wave? " as he shot a shovelful of coal into the fire-box and landed it with precision upon a gray spot in the fire.

The time for talk was past. There came two short low blasts from the whistle and a quick swing of a clean white light from the caboose. The engine was settling heavily to her work and they were off for the pass of the Rim Rock and for home in Alta Vista. At regular intervals, as they slowly climbed the first wave of the foothills, a pulsing shaft of ruddy light shot backward and up into the rolling trail of vapor and smoke, until it faded and was swallowed up in the distance with the sound of the laboring engine. The darkness closed in behind the triangle of red tail lights as they slowly sank below the conquered rise, and silence fell upon the motionless yards. They were gone, said the train-sheet; and the wires repeated, variously, " Gone." A distinct individuality, First Fifty-one, gone into the arid waste, with the finality of death, yet throbbing with hope and the hazard of life.

Something of this was passing in the mind of Bane as he settled comfortably in the cab, adjusted the levers with deft assurance as the work varied, and mentally pictured the familiar miles ahead; always the same, yet always new in their setting at the meeting-points and along the way. Who made it on time? Would Jim Dodson be at Sinker's with Number Two, or would he hang up at Antlers? Extra 905 would make the Dry Hole for water. It was a stock run bringing starved cattle up out of the snow in the southwest.

Was it a safe play to try for Sinker's? Could tell better at Badger. Waverly said the despatcher reported snow on the south side of the pass. None over here yet. Daylight showing on the Spanish Peaks. Beginning to look like the pink and white fire opal the Mexican sold to Waverly at Sentinel yesterday.

A startled coyote leaped across the track before the engine, now rolling rapidly down into the long sag among the shadowy foothills, and Bane regarded him with mingled contempt, amusement, and respect, as he loped with angling head and licking tongue, into the pervading gray of the morning. The wolf's sardonic grin of wisdom held an appeal to hardihood. A creature that lives independently in the barrens is not to be wholly despised by those who know.

Presently the rhythmic beat of the wheels and the exhaust was muffled in the hollow roar of the first bridge over a dry arroyo, and the warm pungent smells of the cab were fanned away upon a wide-sweeping curve to the left, as the breath of a rising wind came out of the northwest. "Snow over there," thought Bane, "but it 's a far call on a clear morning."

At Sinker's the dark bulk of Number Two, overland express, loomed standing upon the crest of the grade, with electric headlight still sending its searchlight rays into the lower shadows, although the day was breaking. Number Two had been doing badly and the 700 was doing well. In spite of leaking flues which threatened to drown the fire, they had left Badger on faith, after the Limited from the east had overtaken and passed them in a close chase, and were exultant at their approach to this farther meeting-point.

Plinney was wearing his cap at a jaunty angle and chanting brokenly, "She was born — in Old Kentucky — where the meadows — bloom — so fair," with abrupt interludes for the delivery of coal to the fire. The prime moment of exultation was at hand, when they would draw heavily past the admiring crew and passengers of Number Two, with an airy wave of the hand. They had figured time closely upon what they knew of every ridge and sag; had come on in the face of Number Two, and "made it with thirty freezers," instead of lying tamely at Badger for a wasted hour and getting hammered by the despatcher for staying there. The experience of years and the courage of clear reasoning had gone into the movement, with few words spoken, but nerves were tense with the hazard. They had about won, and caused no delay. They were now pulling slowly around the base of the final climb into Sinker's, with five minutes to spare by working hard. A slip of the wheels would stall them and turn the day's distinction into disgrace; but the strain was almost over and they would not delay Number Two.

"They 're there," announced Plinney, after a quick glance ahead, before the curve shut out the view of Sinker's crest, "and the switch is open for us." It was his first remark since his brief greeting to Waverly at Crystal. "They 're there," glancing at his watch, "and we 'll just about make it."

A little puff of dust shot out from under the middle of the train. The brakes crashed down upon the wheels, and glancing at the air-gauge they saw the black hand drop back to zero, showing an empty train line.

"Broke in two," said Bane, closing the throttle as the engine stopped almost within the turn of a wheel. Plinney straightened his cap hastily and said nothing, but disgust was written in his blackened face. They had laid out Number Two, crime of crimes, when Number Two was late.

It was a draw-bar pulled out, and fifty minutes later the crippled car had been set to the rear and chained fast, after the train had been pulled into the siding in halves, Number Two had pulled out for the east, and the engine crews had waved one another a solemn greeting as they passed, instead of the usual lofty "high-ball" signal of the moment of passing, when all is well and each crew is proud of its accomplishment. The despatcher had been saying things over the wire during the past hour that were not pleasant for Number Two's crew to hear, and he had burned spots in the feelings of Bane and Waverly for rough handling, of which they were innocent in their brave effort to reach Sinker's.

"Was she born in Old Kentucky, Jim?" mildly asked Bane.

"Nope. Not to-day," replied Plinney, with a dismal shake of the head.

They pulled out soberly for Sentinel, after taking coal and water at Sinker's, and, ten miles out, a fierce snowstorm swept down from the distant mountain and struck them. The long stop at Sinker's added the last touch to the leaking flues, and Plinney fought desperately with his fire, to come into Sentinel some hours later, leaning weakly against the tank, after heaving twelve tons of coal on the run, thus far.

They lunched and rested while the fire was being cleaned, coal, water, and sand taken, the crippled car repaired and switched in, and a helper engine added at front and rear, for the climb through the Rim Rock Pass. But first and second Fifty-two were in trouble on the mountain. A snow-drift and a broken rail held them, blocking the pass.

An hour passed and then another, and it was evening with the storm battling around the top of Vulcan Peak, and sweeping in roaring gusts of snow and sleet into the valley, only to rebound from the yellow face of Rankin's Rest and blot out the narrow defile in which they lay waiting for the Fifty-twos.

"A fool for luck, and a poor man for babies!" vaguely quoted Plinney, as he pulled his head in from beneath the big canvas storm curtain at the rear of the cab, and banged the fire-door open and shut for the twentieth time in the long wait.

"What 's that got to do with it?" snapped Bane, as he turned sharply from his steady stare at the sleet-covered glass in the forward door. "Eh? What 's babies got to do with breaking in two at Sinker's, just when we were there to clear Two, after the trip of our lives; and then freezing here for two hours on account of it? We 'd have been over the pass now, only for that break at Sinker's."

It was getting on the nerves, this long siege of the mountain, and Plinney knew the signs. But it was unusually sharp for Bane. He had seen him bear more and say less, many a time.

"Nothing," said Plinney, and turned the talk to Dodson's hard-luck run with Number Two, as he gave Bane a searching look that had in it the kindness born of understanding. Bane had no babies, nor was he by any chance a fool. He was tired, and then — perhaps — well, no matter, let him alone until the trip was done. Bane 's all right.

"Fool," ran Bane's over-active thoughts. No, he had not been a fool exactly. He had been foolish, even foolhardy at times. He had seen the frontier grow more and more tolerable. It was some rough once. Five years he had fired on the mountain division, before going down to the plains with Enderby, and a year ago he had been promoted to running. He smiled. It was good to come back to Nora an engineer. Then, Nora and he were married. That was worth all of the hard five years. Nora, no doubt, was now cuddled before the fire in Alta Vista, listening to the shrieking of the storm as it was hurled back from the Rim Rock Cliff. That was as snug a cottage as there was under the cliff. The despatcher's bulletin at Sentinel said the storm was roughest over on the Alta Vista side. A poor man. Yes, he was still a poor man but —

"They 're here!" announced Plinney. "Now we 'll hoist ours up for Alta Vista, and let 'em roll down on the other side. This is where I shine for five tons more!"

Two ghostly lines of storm-whipped freight came curling down out of the mouth of the pass in rapid succession, glided by in the storm, and halted for overhauling. The way to the mountain was clear.

"Rights to Alta Vista," said a muffled, snowy figure that came under the curtain. "Meet two Fifty-fours at Unknown Cross. Nothing else on but the work train. Sign, and go home," and Waverly, unruffled, wet, tired, but clear-headed, bustled to the rear, remarking as he dropped off, "High-ball! Let her go!" and waving the signal to the helper engine ahead. Twice, the leading engine called to the engine far at the rear, faintly the answer came through the roaring snow-blast, and fainter still, the echoes from Rankin's Rest. Together, the leading engines slipped uselessly for a moment and belched noisily. From the rear, came the hurrying sputter of the small-wheeled, powerful pusher and the leading engines took fresh hold. The grand assault of the mountain stronghold, years old in the daily telling, yet ever new, ever untold, was begun.

They moved swiftly out over the short creek level, swung sharply to the left, running along the outguard of Vulcan Peak, gaining rapidly in the run for the hill, while a deep-voiced roar from the laboring engines sounded above the fury of the storm, and columns of smoke-shrouded sparks shot fitfully from the smoke-stacks; around the curve and along the veiled Geyser Water, under the bridge spanning the gulch, into the mouth of the gorge, and they were lost in the night and the storm, steadily and doggedly dragged down from their wild flight, to the plodding, hill-conquering gait of the slow and powerful.

Bane glanced at the fire-light playing alternately across the blackened face and broad back of Plinney, as he pivoted upon the engine deck, "shining" in the delivery of his five tons of coal, apparently as fresh now as when he left Crystal in the morning. But Bane knew better. He had been through it too often to be deceived by Plinney's cheerful endurance. He wished he had not been so tart with him at Sentinel. Plinney did not know. How could he? Babies? Nora was a brave little soul, but the high country is a hard place for women. It sets men on edge sometimes, too. Only yesterday Bonner had sat down in the roundhouse after making the best run ever credited to Number One and, for no apparent reason, wept like a child.

It seemed as though he had hold of hills, the way the train pulled. Maybe Hooligan, on the head engine, was shirking again. Bane would just blow him a signal to pull up. He did, and Hooligan put his head out of the cab window into the external uproar long enough to tell Bane by pantomime where he should go to, and disappeared shaking his head, as Bane drew laughingly in and slid the sash against the storm.

Nora wanted to go down off of the mountain before — Without warning, a long and jagged belt of lightning split the darkness high to the left, and writhed blindingly above the top of Vulcan Peak. For a moment, the peak stood blue-black and naked, glaring down upon them in a light like the subtle gleam of steel in a cavern. Then the blackness closed with a stunning crash of thunder that boomed from mountain to mountain and down through the notch of the pass, in reverberations that shook the earth and drowned the roar of the straining engines in an awful farewell of the autumn storms and a salute to the advance of winter. Bane and Plinney exchanged a look of understanding. Plinney continued his firing and Bane resumed his thoughts; no comment needed. A warm air current from the southwest was meeting the snowstorm. There would be dust, rain-mixed, on the other side of the pass.

There was Danforth, whistling from the rear for them to release brakes. Well, Hooligan ahead was carrying the air. It was a hard drag. If they slipped now or broke in two! If all went well, Nora would go east in time — in the spring, and she would visit her mother. He would bring her back with the — boy? He hoped so. Could not blame the girl for worrying; she was a child with a woman's anxiety. She would fret to-night. This rare atmosphere was bad in some ways; but what 's the use fretting? It would all come right with her.

And so the minutes of straining and echoing struggle against the wild pass grew into an hour, and the hour into another. The deep gorges echoed hollowly with the battle and the high bridges sounded their deeper notes of endurance to the frowning rocks, until the leading engines crawled slowly into the tunnel at the crest of the mountain, crossed the apex of the grade, and crept through to a halt in the deep open cut at the south end, where the helper engines were cut off. Plinney had dropped his shovel with a weary sigh and climbed upon the seat-box.

"There!" said he, "we brought them up. Let the brakeman take them down."

"Good enough, Jim," said Bane, smiling, "but I 'll have to take them down. We may need a pick-handle or two twisted into the brake-wheels to-night. Tired?"

"To a finish," said Plinney, and he looked it.

Lights were flitting about the lonely hill station outside, and gruff voices rose for a moment now and then, to be quickly stifled in the swirling blasts.

"Raised hell with Alta Vista," said a passing voice, and Bane shot the sliding sash of his cab window back hastily.

"Hey! What 's that about Alta Vista?"

"Snow-cloud whipped down off of Neilson's *mesa* about six to-night, and met a dust-cloud from the southwest, in Alta Vista. Ripped things up some. Turned to rain, with mud a-blowin', down there. Nigh about cleaned out the Old Town, and laid out some shacks on Main Street. Pheely's undertakin' shop is spread all over the street, and there was coffins sailin' 'round like butterflies, they say. Where 's your shack, Bill? You 're up agin the cliff, ain't you?"

"Yes," said Bane, turning gray under his grime. "Did you hear anything?"

"Nope. Guess your folks is all right, or he 'd 'a said something. Wires are down now between here and the Cross — All right there, Bill! High-ball! The lower switch is set and Hooligan 's in to clear. Let her go, if you 're ready. Fifty-four 's layin' at the Cross for you. Reported in just before the wire went down."

Bane got the signal from the rear, and the 700 moved hesitatingly down the first short grade into the seven miles of steep and crooked track, with only an occasional sag or flat, miles of it, continuously, steep enough for a coaster. Fifteen hundred tons rolling upon smoothly oiled journals down the headlong flights, and it was his to control or ruin; a train worth more money than he ever saw, intrusted to his care, and with it his life and that of the others. The thought always came as he headed into the first curve of the descent.

It looked very steep through the rifts of the storm, and the headlight showed little but swirling sleet. But one overmastering thought held him as his hands moved automatically. — Nora afraid and alone!

When the engine struck the first curve at more than the ordinary speed, Plinney glanced across questioningly at Bane and his eyes rested for a moment upon the air-gauge. It showed a little low for safety, but he said nothing. Engine etiquette forbade it; also, it was too late after the start was made. Events follow rapidly in seconds on the mountain grades. The strain of the curve would retard them while Bane recharged the brakes. Bane glanced at the gauge, leaned forward and stared at it in the increasing sway of the engine, made a hasty release and re-application, and thereby made a fatal mistake. The speed now increased with a lurch that blanched Bane's face and sent the blood thickly to his heart. The brakes had not caught fully, and unless he caught them soon, the wheels would skid upon the sleety rails when he did get them set. Again he quickly recharged and set them, but the pressure was too low and the grip only temporary. He knew it was time to whistle for hand-brakes, but the shame of it held him paralyzed until it was too late; then he whistled one long shrieking blast that told his disgrace to the crew already alarmed and sullenly swinging slow-up signals from the caboose. They sprang to the brakes upon the glazed car tops, crawled a length or two upon the careening upper decks, and lay there swearing and clinging to the foot-boards doggedly. No man could walk those crazy decks in such a storm. Better to risk it there than to leap to the jagged depths below. If Bane could not stop them, they were lost. At the Unknown Cross they might jump, but it was a ragged chance.

Plinney's face had grown gray as that of Bane. Without a word, he crossed with a leap to Bane's side and together they reached for the reverse lever and pulled it up from its chattering hold in the quadrant, until it stood slightly reversed. If she could hold the rails on sand without slipping, her great weight and power would hold them back to the one chance of rounding the lower curves. The familiar landmarks shot by in dizzy, shadowy panorama; the Blasted Pine, close to the track, the Saw-Tooth Notch, which they knew by its roar of sound, the Lizard Rock that passed close to the level of the windows, the first high bridge. Quickly and cautiously, Bane had opened the throttle and steam caught the shooting pistons and opposed their lightning movements. Stronger and stronger came the resistance and the engine hunched back upon the crowding train. The rocking flight had met a check when, heading into the long straight steep below the Lizard Rock, the wheels of the engine slipped and spun wildly backward. Her grip of the rails was lost, and in trying to regain it, a cylinder-head blew out with a roar like that of a ten-inch gun, above the noise of the storm.

"That settles it!" cried Plinney, his hand still upon Bane's shoulder. "I 'm off at Unknown Cross, when we strike the flat! Better come, Bill!"

"Stay on!" shouted Bane, without looking back, as he tried for a final hold of the brakes. The rhythmic patter of the wheels upon the rail joints increased to a maddening tattoo, broken by the intermittent roar of steam from the open cylinder, and the despairing shriek of the whistle sounding the long runaway call. Lurch of the train, from the rear, followed lurch of the engine, from side to side, so quickly that fear was half forgotten in the effort of clinging to the sides of the cab. Wildly, she lunged at the hip of the mountain, above Unknown Cross, and was flung back upon the high rim of the curve along the gulch. For a second, she hung, racing and toppling over the depths of jagged rock and storm-tossed cedars, six hundred feet below, then careened around the point like a drunken mastodon and, shrieking again the lonely cry of distress, plunged down toward the Cross. There, a mile ahead in a drop of one hundred and fifty feet, the signal-light showed white, and free from fear of collision. Bane hoped to make a last successful application of the brakes while running across the mile of flats halfway down the mountain, before plunging over into the final crooked descent into Alta Vista.

If he failed! He thought of the two lonely graves in a cove of rock by the side of the track where, at this passing point, stood the rough timber cross marked by crude carving, "To the Unknown Dead," from which the telegraph office took its name.

"Clear for first Fifty-one, runaway coming — they are gone," wired the operator at Unknown Cross, to the despatcher at Alta Vista.

The yard engines scuttled into sidings, and the switches were quickly set for the main line, to run the luckless 700 through the blinding storm of muddy rain, where snow from the north and dust from the desert were battling, and Alta Vista crouched and waited.

Not a detail in the wild run had escaped Plinney, and when they shot into the flats and half across them without much slackening, he clutched his way to the gangway back of Bane, shouted "Good-bye, Bill!" and leaned far out into the riot of storm for the leap. Instantly, he crashed back upon the engine deck, as the storm-bent, leaning Cross flashed by. He heaved one great breath and rolled up against the fire-door at the next lurch of the engine. Bane leaped from his box and lost a chance of catching a grip of the wheels. He lifted him quickly, reeled with him to the opposite foot-board, and laying him hastily down leaped back to his own place at the throttle and the brake. But those few seconds were lost, and disgrace, discharge, probably death was the price of them. What did it matter, now, if he died? Nora! Their boy! That set his jaw again like steel.

Over the lip of the steep they shot and he sat there like a man dreaming over and over the same hateful nightmare; but doing automatically the things which ordinarily would have brought them home with honor. The riot of sounds beat in upon his numbed senses while the train swept drumming over bridges, reeling along sheer lips of death, rocking unsteadily back to the tangents, around the last curve, and sped into view of the yard lights, shrieking into the open mouth of the valley like the rampant spirit of the storm.

They would live; the curves were passed, and Bane rose to a final effort which brought them to a stop halfway across the long sag of the yards.

He crossed the cab and looked closely at Plinney. Then the shame of it all broke upon him fully, shrivelled his brave heart and seared into the very soul of him. From habit he began wiping his hands with exacting care upon a tuft of cotton waste and stood, meanwhile, vacantly staring at Plinney huddled down beside his seat-box, where a crimson pool had formed darkly upon the board.

Mark Enderby, up from his home in Villa Rica and lying over at Alta Vista on his regular run, always with an ear for news of his former apprentice, had been among the first to hear of Billy's disaster. Even while the ungoverned train was raging down through the pass, he had hurriedly sought out veteran Doc. Maxon and led him striding down to the despatcher's office with his compact and heavy surgical case swinging from his hand.

Now, they came in together under the storm curtain of the engine cab and stood looking with a great relief, for a moment, upon Billy's upstanding figure in the half darkness of the cab.

"How did you lose them, Billy?" asked Enderby very quietly, as he laid a kindly touch upon the younger man's arm.

"I never had hold of them right after I left the top of the mountain. Nora — The storm — You know, Enderby," replied Bane, in the dead-level tone of utter hopelessness.

"Not so bad, not so bad!" said Maxon, scanning him closely for sign of injury.

"Where 's Plinney?" asked Enderby.

"Dead!" said Billy, and pointed to the silent figure in the shadows.

"Eh?" said Maxon turning swiftly. "That 's different! How do you know? Let us see. Let us see."

His stern face lost its look of calm rejoicing and hardened for a battle against death as he hovered over the quiet face of Plinney. Soon he straightened from his eager search and softly replacing Plinney's fallen cap upon his face, said:

"There is nothing here for me to do, Enderby."

"Your wife 's out there, Billy," said Enderby, slowly crowding him toward the gangway. "Go on home. I 'll look after things here. Go with them, Doc., will you?"

"Take care of Plinney," said Bane huskily.

"Go on home," replied Enderby, steadily.

Outside, near the track, in the lee of the despatcher's office, stood a little group, mud-smeared, storm-beaten, but silent, with a mite of a woman, tear-stained and smiling vaguely.

"Oh, Billy, I 'm so glad!" she cried, as Maxon and Bane came from the engine.

"*Glad?* Oh! All right, little woman," he added quickly with lowered voice as he stooped above her. "I understand. We lost — Jim and I. The mountain won. Come home," and, picking her up tenderly in his big arms, he strode away into the night and the storm, toward the Rim Rock Cliff.

Doc. Maxon kept pace silently in the rear until he passed with them, as a comforter in time of trouble, into their little cottage under the cliff, well knowing that this night marked the passing of Billy from the life of the mountain divisions. For when a man "loses them" upon the mountain and another's life is the price, he cannot stay, and seldom can he return. The mountain exacts even more, a double price. It requires that he who fails or falters at its sterner mood shall, within and of himself, render up, in silence, the things it has grudgingly given in barter for his wearing days and nights,— his pride of craft, his place among his fellows, his right to the mountains and their smile.

CHAPTER III

ROCK-A-BY JOHNSON

EVEN though the lurking glint of humor that seldom vanished wholly from his eyes might not indicate it, Conductor Waverly had his solemn hours. Many such hours, many days, indeed, had followed the passing of Jim Plinney and the discharge of Billy Bane, before Waverly was considered sufficiently purged of his involuntary part in the runaway, and restored to duty.

Following this were some months of perhaps the most careful freighting he had ever done and then, one summer afternoon, he found himself uniformed in the more pretentious though not more important brass and blue of the passenger service, in lieu of the modest nickelled badge upon the hat-band of a freight conductor. It is one of the compensations of the service that it breeds a type of man who, at his best, can with equal fitness wear the uniform of any of its phases and at the last, perhaps, sit equally well in neutral garb, in the seats of the railroad's mighty.

Clear and high, as to altitude, yet deep down at the centre of a vast bowl in the mountains, nestles Villa Rica, at the end of the first mountain division and the beginning of the second. The sheer black walls of this ancient crater spring high from the concave bottom, in a nearly true circle around the village, except for two deep passes in the mighty rim, in line from east to west directly across its four miles of diameter, and for the narrow mouth of the box-canyon which opens grudgingly toward the coal camp at Harmony.

Outside of the rim, for miles upon the mountain's sloping sides, are strewn black volcanic fragments of a rocky cap which the mountain, long ago, tossed high in air, shattered and flaming, in a frenzy of earth-making.

Clear New Mexican sunshine and the electrified air make of the rather sombre-hued pit a welcome retreat among the surrounding barrens, and the placid life of the village revolves around the ample shops and roundhouse, which, from afar, are mere gray dots upon the green watered space of the great central bottom.

The railroad tracks dip gleaming down from the passes, straight, deep, and true as the arc of a pendulum's swing. From time to time, the notches of the passes are darkened by oncoming trains and the little adobe hamlet with its trailing loops and banners of crimson chili peppers blazing in the sun stirs with repressed life, like that of an ant-lion disturbed and made alert by the rolling of a grain of sand to the bottom of its retreat.

The trains drop swiftly to the village, change engines, on occasion pass each other, and hurry away over the heights toward Balceta and the coast, leaving Villa Rica to relapse into an habitual, picturesque laziness which takes little note of the sometimes fierce activities of the busy shops.

In the midst of this, with the gay sunlight smiling down upon them, Waverly and Red Bill Jones, a new brakeman, sat awaiting the coming of the Overland Express. It might well be that theirs was not a solemn mood and that the careless ease of a nearby group of high-hatted natives, who sat cross-legged, gambling upon a blanket spread in the shade of a cottonwood by the tracks, communicated itself in some measure to the two railroad men.

ROCK-A-BY JOHNSON

Rousing from some minutes of a silent retrospection, Waverly spoke. Perhaps, in a rebound of spirits from the sorry days through which he had passed, he deliberately set himself the task of painting in lurid hues the pure white lily of railroad truth. Or, the misnamed tiger lily with its daring reds and leopard spots, may have — but of what use is it to guess his prompting?

Whether the tale that he unfolded was merely colored by the roseate hue of memories that cling to the halcyon days of railroading before the "modernizing experts" grew apace, or whether he cheerfully extemporized for the entertainment of the stranger brakeman within the gates, it is certain that Balceta's prosaic office files indicate that one Johnson, once upon a time, came to sudden local fame and a mild sort of railroad infamy, somewhat in the way of Waverly's telling. And it is equally certain that Waverly's first utterance was a harmless truth.

"That," said he, nodding toward an engineer who was oiling around a big express engine that stood before the little station, "is Rock-a-by Johnson. He will pull us on the Overland."

"Rock-a-by Johnson!" echoed the brakeman, tilting his chair to an easy angle against the adobe wall of the Casa Grande Hotel. "Well, that might be a winner in vaudeville, but what 's he doing with it on a fast-line engine?"

"It was a winner in vaudeville — once — and it 's a winner now, anywhere you find Johnson on this line, *hombre*," responded Waverly slowly, dividing his attention impartially between a critical admiration of Johnson's engine and the filling of his own pipe.

"They can't, any of them, beat him much on fast-line;

and he pulled me into and out of many a tight place in the older days on freight.

"If I was cornered hard, I 'd have to say that Johnson was some reckless, years back, but not now. And he sure is n't, and never was, what you could call a weak member.

"Right here between these passes is where he got it. Before that, he was just plain Jack Johnson. Time was, when it was just as well not to call him 'Rock-a-by,' if he heard you."

Johnson, having taken a careful half-turn on the cover of a grease cup, finished his inspection and climbed into the engine cab. Hearing the familiar name, which had long since ceased to offend, his weather-browned face took on a fleeting smile. He nodded a friendly salute to Waverly and his companion, and then pulled down a length or two below the station.

The new brakeman lazily watched the crumpling of rich brown Mexican leaf between Waverly's thumb and palm, and when Waverly passed the pouch to him, briefly asked:

"Chihuahua?"

"Huimanguillo. Imported from over the border, in Johnson's seat-box, as rolled overalls. Which proves that the meek shall inherit the earth, or at least some of the good things thereof, and no questions asked by customs men, as of the proud and haughty tourist great," laughed Waverly.

"Nothing better for a smoke," agreed the brakeman, thumbing the tobacco with the air of an expert. "I 'll take a dose."

As the soft exhaust of Johnson's engine ceased throbbing, the expectant hush of late afternoon again settled upon the sleepy little border town. The western pass, backed by the slanting sun, shone like a great golden wedge in the dark wall of the rim-rock and the shadows were beginning to reach toward the sunny central plat.

Waverly's eyes swept up searchingly from the slim gold watch in his hand, to the sky-line above the pass; then down, with a reminiscent, smiling glance upon the group that sat softly swearing and lisping musical gutturals upon their gaudy blanket, winning or losing with subdued expressions of deep unction. They had ceased their playing only long enough to gaze in awed silence at Johnson rolling slowly by, at the cab window; and Johnson had set a narrow-eyed look upon the blanket, seeming to imply something more than was there apparent.

The brakeman was looking, with a gleam of interest, toward Johnson's farther position.

" Maybe we have time for it, if you want it," said Waverly, catching the import of his companion's glance.

" It looks to-day just about as it did when Johnson broke over the pass with his bob-tail engine and waked up Villa Rica, as only a doby town can wake up on short notice; and that 's been many a day ago.

" There 's old Camargo in that bunch, leaning over the dealer; too old to gamble now, but he used to run the Hidalgo monte parlor, and take in a good-sized slice of Johnson's pay, along with that of some more people I know even better than I know Johnson. But Camargo sure lost a wad the day Johnson made his celebrated run.

" And I see others in that game, now, who bet their sombreros on Johnson, that day, and went home bareheaded, after the thing was over.

" Herrera, a blind siding, lies three miles over the western rim, yonder, just as it did those years ago; no telegraph office.

" Johnson was pulling me up from Balceta, with eight cars of what we then called fast freight, when he sheared a cross-head key and blowed a cylinder-head out with the piston of his old wood-burner engine.

" The siding lies in a sag and, by making a quick throw of the switch, we managed to drag in off the main line, with one side blowing.

" I wanted Johnson to wait until we were overtaken and let the next section couple on and help us to the rim and drop us down with themselves to Villa Rica. But he was ashamed to do that, and held that he could cut the tender loose — no air those days — and let himself over here for help, with the engine's good side working in back motion, down that west grade there."

" Daffy ! " said the brakeman, staring through a blue haze of fragrant Huimanguillo to where the shimmering rails appeared to run together at the far top of the hazardous grade.

" That 's what I told him, but he would n't have it. So, his fireman climbed off — and I had n't the heart to see him go it alone, after all we had gone through together. I stayed with him," said Waverly, in half apology.

" Holy smoke ! " exclaimed the brakeman.

" You bet ! " nodded Waverly, rather irrelevantly, but with much earnestness.

" Well, we blocked one side of her without much trouble," Waverly continued dubiously. " We filled up the boiler, cut loose and pinched her over the centre, and Johnson worked her up to the rim-rock without stalling.

" When he tipped over into the sink here, he put the right side to working easy, in back motion.

" Look at that grade ! " Waverly suddenly exclaimed, pointing with his pipe-stem, up the western slope. "A doby dollar will slide down flat on the rail head, from top to bottom; or nigh about do it.

"I should n't wonder if Johnson strained the right side some, pulling into the siding at Herrera. At any rate, all went pretty well until we were about one-fourth of the way down here from the top.

"By that time, we were coming a little too fast and Johnson gave her some more of the breeching.

"For a celebration, it would have been hard to beat, but I would n't admire to be present at any more of that kind of jubilee. She let go with a roar like a mortar battery and the right-hand piston shot out and ploughed up the dirt ballast two lengths ahead and then went to turning handsprings and somersaults, playing tag down the grade with fragments of the cylinder-head.

"Before the echoes were done booming back from the rock circle, we were going at a rate that made Johnson's blouse-flaps snap in the wind till I could hear them across the engine, between the ripping blasts of steam at every half-turn of the wheels, roaring out of the open cylinder. Beautiful fix, was n't it?"

The brakeman paled a shade under his tan, nodded, and with a quick rap emptied the ashes from his pipe in silence.

"'Hop?' I called across to Johnson. For answer, he swung around on his cushion and hung his feet out of the cab window. Then he pulled the whistle-cord tight over his shoulder and gave them notice down here that we were coming, and just grinned at me.

"'Big day for Villa Rica!' he yelled.

"It was," Waverly added emphatically, with another wide-eyed glance up the western slope.

"The wind was whipping tears from our eyes by then, but we could see the villagers down here scuttling around like a nest of red ants on queen day; first, toward the tracks, and then, when they caught the full sound of us, scurrying away from the tracks and into the nearest dobies.

"We swooped down into the bottom, here, in less than a minute from the time Johnson gave them first call with the whistle, and the uproar was something scandalous. He was holding the whistle open then, and when he first realized that he had made a mess of it, he was too mad to shut the throttle — did n't matter a particle to us, of course, with both sides dead — so the steam was snorting from the cylinder, and the whistle whooping, and Johnson with his feet out of the window, looking as savagely happy as a fighting man can look when he is mad enough to quarrel with a hatching hen.

"We dove through here like a crippled hawk on a down swoop, and not a man in sight, except where a high hat stuck out of a doby door, for a second, and disappeared with a jerk.

"Just as we struck the sand-house switch, there, this side of where Johnson's engine now stands, the shock from the frog and the sweep of the air ripped the old balloon-top stack loose at the base and it keeled over on the boiler, bounced off to one side, and rolled across the clay platform, plugging the door of Camargo's Hidalgo parlor as tight as a cork plugs a bottle.

"Camargo and his people came out of the window like a flock of bats from a knothole, and before we had scudded a third of the way up grade, they had a blanket down on the ground and were laying bets upon whether we would go on over the pass, or run back here to Villa Rica.

"Well, of course, we did n't go over, but it was n't much of a margin in our favor, and when she began to slow up, toward the top of her first climb, I thought I had had enough. None of them, down below, was likely to be in doubt about which way we were going, when we ran back.

"'Come on, Jack!' I called to Johnson, and climbed off, just as she was coming to a halt.

"'I told you at Herrera that I am going to stay with her,' he gritted at me through his teeth. 'It 's straight track, and a hot time for Villa Rica. I 'll pick you up when I come up next time,' he sung out over his shoulder, as she started back down the hill.

"You can call it what you please, Bo, but I ran after her and hopped on again."

"Well, that 's what I 'd call it!" said the brakeman, in disgust. "And I 'm obliged to tell you that I would n't whisper it none, either."

"That 's right," Waverly assented. "I *know* I was. But you 've no idea how the thing got into my blood when I found that Johnson was going to ride her to a stand-still.

"'I can go where you can,' I told him, and I got up on the fireman's side, and we stayed with her.

"Talk about your tobogganing, roller-coasting, snowshoeing down the side of a mountain on a snow crust! I have done them all, and those runs up one side of the sink and down the other had them rolled into one, and beaten tame as sheep, at that.

"She gathered speed at every turn, until her little wheels could do no more —"

"Might have thrown her rods through you!" volunteered the brakeman.

"Yes. That 's what I was thinking, then," said Waverly, "but she did n't. And we ran down to the group on the blanket, so quick that they had not time to get their money all off the blanket for the east-side run and place it for the rush up the other side. They were just making the pay-off when the engine dove down close upon them. A little too late, old Camargo jumped to his feet, holding a corner of the blanket, and turned his back to the track with the others.

"The hurricane of wind, dust, and steam from the engine caught them across their crouching backs, swooped under the upturned blanket and waved it like a banner, then whirled them, blanket, men, and money, into a tangled web of arms and legs, fighting like a bunch of coyotes over a downed maverick calf, before the cloud we had stirred up shut out our brief sight of them.

"The town was in an uproar, and a bunch of horsemen came racing after us up the west grade. But they might as well have chased a bullet, at that stage of the run. They galloped their horses a mile up the ditch by the tracks, after us, with Johnson yelling '*Bravo! Bravissimo, hombre!*' although you could not have heard his voice ten feet outside of the cab window — and he knew it.

"They got down and laid their game there, on how far we should run up and how long it would take us to get back. There were great business opportunities in the run, for them, you see, and they moved their camp down the slope to suit, after we passed them on the return; and in that way they, and several other groups strung out on both sides of Villa Rica, stayed with us to the finish.

"It is safe to say that they covered every point upon which a bet could be laid. The whistling-post on each side of the town, the station board, the dry culvert, and the bridge over the Canadian Fork, each had its bevy of speculators, and the sight of it got into Johnson's sporting blood.

" Six times we made the hair-raising dive through the town, and the smoking driving-boxes and truck journals were beginning to shorten down our run quite rapidly, when I discovered that the western pass was darkened by the bulk of the second section, the crew of which stood looking down in high glee, upon our continuous performance.

" With the danger of the first wild speed past, it was to the boys on the hill a big safe open-air vaudeville of rock-a-by, with Johnson taking the star part, but it had to come to a finish and let them flag down off the hill as they had flagged up from Herrera.

" I told Johnson so, and then he sprung the scheme he had been hatching while watching the antics of the Mexicans.

" ' It 's not square! ' I told him.

" ' It 's as square as Camargo's monte game that we 've been bucking for the last three years,' said Johnson, sticking out his chin at me.

" I had to admit that he was right, at that, so when we dipped down that time, I stayed on as long as I could, toward the town; then hopped off and ran the rest of the way to where old Camargo had reorganized his game on the blanket — right where you see them now.

" I bet him two hundred and fifty in gold, against a blanketful of doby silver, that Johnson would not pass the station twice more before the engine stopped. He took a look at Jack's bob-tail racing up the east bank, and it looked so good to him that he took me as if he was afraid I 'd get away.

" We gave the stakes to Abe Hazard, station agent as well as marshal then, to hold. Abe was the surest gun-hand in the place, and nobody ever argued much with him.

" The rest of them made bets among themselves, when they got the idea, and there was hardly a saddle, hat, or pair of boots in the crowd that was not up on the game. It looked so sure, too, that Johnson would go on dealing the game for their amusement for at least three short trips more, that most of the stuff was offered that he would pass the station twice more, and they had to give big odds to get any takers.

" I sort of lost interest in it, after Abe Hazard put the money away for me and Johnson; but I slid out around the station and after Johnson went by once, going west, throwed that strap switch that leads to the blind end against the sand house.

" The next time she came nosing down, the journals were blazing. She took the switch as pretty as anything you ever saw and ran half a dozen lengths short of the station and butted her nose into the sand house and stopped; just as if she had been having her fun and was tired.

" Johnson sat there with his fool feet out of the window, kicking his heels against the side of the cab, and sung out: ' How much did we make, Waverly? '

" Old Camargo yelled like a hyena, but you had to know when to quit yelling around Abe Hazard, those days; and Camargo knew. Besides, he knew he 'd soon get it back from us at monte; so Johnson and I whacked up with Abe, in the station, and what we cleared near about squared us for the thirty-day lay-off we each got for making a fool play with the engine.

" There 's Enderby," he finished, pocketing his pipe, as a little cloud of mottled white and black rolled up above the notch of the western pass and floated away into the red glow of the sun behind the mountain. The big bulk of the Overland Express darkened the notch of the pass, for a moment, and then the magnificent train came sweeping down the long grade toward them, with a solemn dignity that reckoned nothing of the hare-brained comedy of Johnson's and Waverly's earlier making upon the line of her stately coming.

But a few minutes more, and Waverly, with the brakeman, stood at Johnson's gangway handing up orders. A soft Spanish voice rose from the undisturbed group upon the blanket.

"*Sesta ?*" it questioned, enticingly.

"*Cinco*," came the equally soft but positive reply.

"*Si*," answered the first voice, eagerly, and the wager was laid.

"Johnson, do you hear that?" said Waverly, with a spark of deviltry glowing deep in his upturned eyes. "They have been betting on you ever since you staged your great one-act farce of 'Rock-a-by Johnson,' and they are at it now.

"They have that stack of *pesos* down on whether it will take six minutes, or five, for you to pull up through the east notch, after we get a-going!"

"I would n't mind having a few down on that, myself — if it was ten years back — but that 's all done for now, eh, Waverly?" said Johnson, after carefully reading, signing, folding the orders and tucking them away in his blouse pocket. "But, the señor who bet his stack on the 'five' takes the *pesos*. Give me the 'high-ball' and get aboard, you fellows, for I 'm a-going, right now!"

Five minutes later, the observation windows in the rear end of the Overland blinked back twin points of light from the setting sun; down from the notch of the pass to the waiting group upon the blanket. Then the sky-line of the pass cleared and the Overland was gone.

The señor who bet on the "five" had won, and the little bevy of Villa Rica citizens took up its blanket and dissolved into the lengthening shadows among the adobes.

CHAPTER IV

A TANGLE IN RED TAPE

"YES, he 's had the experience, now, and he 's just about born with the judgment to back it up. He 'll swing the job, all right, never fear," said Enderby.

He was speaking to his fireman, McPeltrie, and a few other congenials who had foregathered at Villa Rica roundhouse water tank, a few days after the arrival of Dinwiddy, the new master mechanic.

Dinwiddy, as a boy, had been known to a few of the older men. Later, as a young man of much quiet strength of character, he had been known to many of all ages upon the two divisions. But, as master mechanic at a point so trying as Villa Rica, he was a new and material factor that seemed to require their very serious consideration.

"Yes, he 'll swing it and, as square as ever a place was run, he 'll run it, you can rely," Enderby continued, when nothing to the contrary was forthcoming.

"I found him chuckling over a little parcel of something or other that he found among his belongings, when he 's unpacking, the other day, and from what he told me about it he got up to passing high notice at headquarters, once or twice, and had some stirring moments as master mechanic over Red River way.

"I 've known him since buttoned waists, but at that, he 's not given to saying much."

"Let 's have it, Pap," said McPeltrie promptly. "Let 's know some about this wonder-child."

"Not so fast, not so fast!" protested Enderby laughingly. "I can mebbe tell you some about him when needful, but, without seeing all the papers he alludes to while he 's telling it, or knowing the complete internals of it, I would n't like to venture out on such a schedule. It ain't so important as avoiding engine delays, at any rate, and we must be moving, Mack. You will get to know Dinwiddy's ways, all in good time."

The members of the gathering separated and went about their various, leisurely preparations for the running of schedules of which they knew the "complete internals."

The "schedule" of the Red River incident, upon which Dinwiddy had ventured cautiously and upon which Enderby would not venture at all, was this.

The north-bound mail, starting out of Oscalla, down in the Texas border, early one summer morning, launched a boomerang.

Dinwiddy, who handed the missive to the railway mail clerk, was peacefully unaware of its peculiar destiny. The duties of master mechanic at Oscalla did not weigh heavily just then, and Dinwiddy allowed himself some latitude. The place was then little more than a name. The new division ran down over the rolling plains to the river, barely crossed it into Texas, and ended there. But Texas law required that there be a master mechanic stationed within the State line, and Dinwiddy was sent over from the mountain divisions of the main line and duly installed.

He was young, he liked the open country second only to the mountains and, with his handful of men, was fairly busy and quite happy in this, his first official appointment. With content like that of a captain on his own quarter-deck, he walked a turn or two upon the little station platform. Yet the voice of spring was crooning in the wake of a Texas " norther " recently past, and Dinwiddy was yielding to the call to come afield.

Reaching the end of the station platform for the second time, he crossed the track, sprung two strands of barbed-wire fence apart to pass his lithe body, and sidled through into the grove of naked pecan trees that fronted the depot and office.

Selecting a few of the fittest of the brown nuts that had lain ungathered through the winter, he cracked them between his strong teeth, while he watched the fluttering tail flags of the mail train disappear in the slant of the bridge over Red River. He munched contentedly at the frost-sweetened kernels, and listened to the regular, chuckling exhaust of the engine until the train glided into view again at the farther side of the river.

" I 'll make a job of that, if they send it down in time," he said aloud, and turning, walked farther among the gray tree-trunks.

In the " R. R. B." budget, four days later, with some other railroad business, came a question to Oscalla direct from the Chicago office.

" Your number 2880," it read. " Why Glimmer's, instead of Standard? "

Below the question Dinwiddy wrote: " For use on special. Standard slightly corrosive. Please rush."

The clerk who received that reply, in the office of the superintendent of motive power, at Chicago, was a friend of a friend of Keener, the purchasing agent, and the friend of Keener sat near the clerk.

" I 'd let Keener see that," said the friend.

Keener, from long experience, expected objections and, to his eyes, points of objection protruded from the pages of his correspondence like thorns upon which he must nakedly walk. First and last, it was the objections that impressed him most.

For various reasons, he considered Standard a good thing to buy. It carried with it a line of more important purchases that meant much in the sum total of the year's expenditures for the railroad, and, therefore, meant much to Keener.

" We have a request for Glimmer's, to replace Standard, on a rush order. Standard said to be slightly corrosive and destructive. What do you advise? "

That is what Keener read, over the signature of the superintendent of motive power, per clerk. Well meant, hurried, perhaps, but a somewhat stronger indictment than Dinwiddy had laid against Standard.

Corrosive? Slightly corrosive? Why, of course it was slightly corrosive! Why not? Did they think it was eatable?

Destructive? *Destructive!* Why d-thunder! Then Keener wrote:

" I am sending you an unbroken package of Standard, to-day, and advise that you submit it at once to your chemist, for analysis. I am satisfied that his report will justify the use of Standard, and nothing else."

To Lowry, the chemist at Rainbow, the assembled papers went in next day's mail and in the baggage car went the package of Standard for analysis.

" Please note, herewith, all papers on corrosive effect of Standard, and receive under separate tag the package for analysis.'

"Your report is desired, as early as possible, giving full information. The purchasing agent is quite positive, and we are holding an order, subject to your report." So wrote the clerk.

Lowry, in the busy midst of a laboratory full of half-finished physical tests, where Moser's pulling-gear was whirring, his own test-tubes bubbling, and small crucibles glowing, read into the bunch until the first grave charge of destructiveness was found. He turned that letter and the package over to an assistant, and gave his instructions.

"Attached is report of analysis of Standard," wrote Lowry, very soon, "and all papers returned.

"The analysis shows that there is a slight excess of elements which, in full strength, would be destructive to oily or fatty matter, cast iron, steel, or other carbon-bearing material; but does not indicate a bad combination for brass, nickel, or silver.

"To illustrate: The active elements would not injure a brass hand-rail but, in full strength, would rapidly destroy a car wheel, if allowed to drip into the throat or fillet."

Lowry had that report thought out carefully enough, and the main point at issue was covered; but too deeply. In his mental habit of demonstrator and chemist, he seized upon an unfortunate illustration.

The subject of broken flanges on freight-car wheels was up just then, and the correspondence was rapidly taking on color in its trail from the office of division superintendent, through the office of general superintendent, to the office of general manager; from the office of general manager, through the office of chief engineer, to the office of division engineer, and back to the general manager; never missing the office of superintendent of motive power, before it started on another round of accumulation.

Freight cars had broken down and strewn the main-line passenger tracks with wreckage, at a critical moment. Also, some steel tires had gone to pieces unaccountably, and altogether there had recently been some awful slaughter of passengers. The wrecked coaches were, even then, standing well in behind the main shops at Rainbow, with their racks and head-linings smeared with blood, and their exteriors red with southern clay.

When the correspondence about Standard got back to Chicago, with Lowry's illustration added, the clerk glanced at the last paragraph and saw, as he believed, a chance to relieve the tension on the subject of broken flanges. He showed the letter, without the budget, to the superintendent of motive power.

"Ask Moser whether he ever saw anything of this kind," said the superintendent of motive power, clutching at a straw, after a hasty reading of Lowry's letter. "Ask him whether that stuff could crack wheel flanges in the fillets; sounds unlikely to me."

"Have you observed anything indicating that the Standard preparation we are using would injure wheel fillets by corrosion?" That was the question that went from the clerk, back to Moser, mechanical engineer at Rainbow, although Moser, close and amiable office-neighbor to Lowry, had stood within hand's reach of the budget when it winged its brief flight through the laboratory.

"Might, if submerged in it a long time," wrote Moser briefly across the letter, after making sure that the signature was not that of the superintendent of motive power, and believing it to be a random shot from the general office staff.

Thinking to fortify the situation which he had apparently developed, the clerk re-mailed this letter, when received, to Myerson, general master mechanic at Rainbow, and accompanied it with another.

"What is your observation on matter contained in attached papers?" said his query to Myerson.

There the accumulation might easily have ceased and the blind lead ended, had it been anybody but Myerson. He, fortunately for himself and unfortunately for everybody else on the road, was a friend of the friend of a friend of the friend of a man who held, or manipulated, a good deal of stock in the road. That is, Myerson had, long ago, caught out from under the wheels of a backing switch engine a setter pup that had strayed across the depot platform to where Myerson, then a car-cleaner, was working. The friend, who owned the dog, out of momentary gratitude had got for Myerson his first look toward advancement and, by careful dodging and trimming and some small ability, Myerson had steered his craft to the point where it had become understood that he was not to be disturbed. Therefore, Myerson stood firmly in the track of railroad business and batted both ways at all things that came toward him; batted just hard enough to pass the responsibility to somebody else, and assumed no risk from original thought or action.

When the Glimmer's-Standard papers struck his desk they went, almost without halting, to the master car-builder, bearing Myerson's usual and eminently safe indorsement: "Please note and return."

When the papers came back, with the car-builder's guarded side-step added, Myerson wrote upon them: "Please note.

Our master car-builder thinks steel-tired wheels safest," and put the papers in Chicago mail.

Then with the furtive air of a subordinate, which he had never been able wholly to discard, he went out through the roundhouse, around back of the coal chutes, and into the Midland Hotel bar for his mid-afternoon refreshment; then came deviously back to his office to sweat it out, whispering with a sigh: "This railroad business is killing hard work."

The papers got into the general offices at Chicago just when the general manager was calling for all papers on broken wheel flanges, and arranging a meeting with the car company's representative.

Ernest, the motive power office boy, coming from the mail-room, bearing the innocent Dinwiddy budget, now some three inches thick, met chubby little Ike, the chief engineer's office boy, with the six-inch budget of broken-flange literature, and they halted and sneered at one another in the long tiled hallway of the fourteenth floor.

"What you got?" snarled Ike.

"What you doin' on our floor?" challenged Ernest.

"Look an' see, speckle-face," replied Ike.

"Dare you to lay yer papers down, toad," scowled Ernest.

"You lay down yours," gritted Ike.

The two sheaves of paper struck the floor together, and the pair of bobbing heads went bumping against the marble wall. There was a scuffling exchange of sounding thumps from knotty fists and when the janitor pulled the boys apart in passing and handed to each a bunch of papers, Ernest's thumb left a gory print upon the Dinwiddy bunch and Ike spattered a few battle-brewed tears upon the wheel-flange biography.

But together they laid their burdens upon the clerk's desk, and he, combining them, thus put Dinwiddy's modest requisition well to the middle of the now formidable budget, and no longer knew that it was there.

Planted unassumingly by Dinwiddy, watered by the tears of little Ike, enriched by the blood of Ernest, and assiduously fostered by all hands, the innocent requisition was now a fearsome thing to look upon in its latest growth. And, although departments of general offices are often separated only by floors or corridors of the same building, the intricacies of railroad records and files are sometimes such that, as in this instance, correspondence, once started, is hard to stop.

"Herewith, all papers on broken wheel flanges," wrote the clerk. "Your file 9076, our file 5043, and," catching sight of his own earlier letter, but not of the requisition, which was tucked short up in the file, "2880, Dinwiddy."

The papers, thus combined, went to the general manager, and that afternoon there was a spirited meeting in which the pleasant amenities of greeting rapidly gave place to lightning flashes of debate. The discussion reached its climax in the general manager's terse question:

"We have here," said he, "in failed wheels under guarantee, damaged track and rolling-stock, and claims for personal injury resulting, about eighty-three thousand dollars. That is what we expect to fight it down to. What are you car people going to do about it? That is what we must know, to-day."

Softly, the car people's ambassador spoke. He spoke directly and with a soothing politeness to the general manager; indirectly, and with only a shade less of consideration to the chief engineer; obliquely to the general superintendent; persuasively to the superintendent of motive power;

and, by implication, to Moser, the mechanical engineer, who, by an all-night run, had arrived with his head and his hands full of graphic testimonies.

What the ambassador said was so subtly intertwined with what he really meant that, written, it would fail of its effect. But, spoken, all present understood, by imperceptible degrees, that whither the car folks went the railroad folks would go; that where one lodged the other would lodge; that the car folks' people were the railroad people's folks, and the car folks' gods were the railroad people's gods; that where the car folks died the railroad people would die and there would they be buried.

It rapidly became apparent, in short, that somebody had run past a signal, farther back, somewhere in the line of events, and when Brangs, the chief engineer, spoke, thumbing through the correspondence in a momentary, awkward hush, he spoke from the depths of much hard-bought wisdom:

" Seems to me," said he, " this man Dinwiddy, down there at Oscalla, went off at a tangent; made a fuss about nothing, did n't he, Yates? "

" Let 's see ! " demanded the superintendent of motive power, with an accent of surprise tinged with indignation. " Why, this is a mix —"

" Clearest case I ever saw," calmly interrupted the chief engineer.

When Yates looked up in bewilderment from the few plain words of Dinwiddy's writing, the bronzed face of Brangs, ordinarily keenly alive, was quite the most expressionless of all in the conference. There was something in his steady eyes, however, that found its way at once to Yates and the others, and Yates was hardly less surprised than his listeners when he involuntarily stammered:

"Why, yes — yes, I guess he did! I'll take that up with him at once!"

"Well, take the papers and get your differences adjusted between departments," said Sharer, the general manager. "This is rather disappointing, that we find ourselves still unprepared. Please return our file when you have finished with it."

The meeting broke up in a short informal chat. The broken-flange "whale" had found a breathing place in the ice of constraint which had so suddenly formed, and if Dinwiddy could have looked in at the peaceful finish he might have thought: "There she blows!"

But Dinwiddy was busy and happy in Texas, turning things back promptly across Red River. The illumining light that had fallen upon the wheel question had apparently revealed only Dinwiddy's requisition, tucked harmlessly into the heart of the budget, but therein seemed to lie the way and the truth.

"Tell that man Dinwiddy to keep to Standard, after this, and not go to ordering special stuff, without permission!" said Yates, to the clerk, when he got back to his office with the budget. "But you may send him one package of Glimmer's."

To Dinwiddy, the clerk wrote: "Referring to your 2880: Your requisition for Glimmer's instead of Standard has caused much needless trouble. Please order Standard, and all regular supplies, hereafter, unless special permission is obtained to vary.

"The package of Glimmer's will be forwarded to you, to fill this requisition, but no more of it will be furnished. Please be more careful in future."

Ernest, the office boy, still deeply interested in his injured nose, that evening copied the letter in the press-book, attached it to the combined file and, by mistake of course, the total product was mailed to Dinwiddy of Oscalla.

Spring was gone and the pecan trees were in full leaf, when about two days later the budget landed upon Dinwiddy's rickety little desk, in a morning delivery. He looked at the opening paragraph and smiled. From long habit, he turned to the undermost papers.

"Well I'm —" he exclaimed, but did not then finish his announcement.

He picked up his hat, lifted the bunch of papers, walked slowly out and slipped through the wire fence into the pleasant shade of the pecan grove. There, he sat upon his favorite log and read.

He read of chill-cracks and shell-outs and skid-flats and of splintered car bodies and torn-up track; of broken headlinings and corroded car wheels. He read of mangled limbs and wrenched and maimed bodies, and of darker things that made his seasoned heart chill. And then came glimpses of damage suits, claiming fabulous sums; until he found and read his own requisition, coming finally back to the letter last written.

"Well, I'm a pelican! A flapping, fish-eating *pelican*, if it is n't all on me!" he whispered in wonder. But Dinwiddy was a loyal young soldier.

"All papers to you, herewith," he wrote that evening, "closing my 2880.

"We can get on without the Glimmer's soap emulsion. I wanted it to brighten up the general superintendent's car, when he laid up here one night last spring. He wrote me that the car would need some cleaning and scouring on arrival and thought Standard was a little too strong for some of his plated work."

But the mills of the gods, grinding slowly and exceeding fine, are swift and frivolous things, as against the mills of correspondence which were grinding out Dinwiddy's reward with exceeding finality.

In a week or two, the canister of Glimmer's emulsion arrived at Oscalla. To the end of his stay there, Dinwiddy glanced at it sometimes, where it remained on top of his desk, and, laughing softly, he would say:

"Well, I'm a pelican!"

CHAPTER V

THE FOUR-EYED CUSS

"WHY will he?" queried an even-toned but disbelieving voice.

The question was aimed at Dodson, who stood defiantly in the midst of a gathering at the judgment seat, in the lee of the roundhouse water tank.

"Hi!" screeched a high-keyed voice, as a dismal face was suddenly thrust above the level of the rails of the ashpit in the foreground, where a spasmodic cloud of dust had been lifting.

The owner of the mournful countenance had promptly won the name of "Sackcloth," when he drifted into Villa Rica, on his uppers and a truss-rod plank, and took a turn at the ashpit job; and, allowing for his generally dishevelled appearance, from "Sackcloth" to "Sacks" was easy for short.

The weather-tanned faces in the cluster of well-worn blue, at the tank caucus, turned, with one accord, toward the apparition of the ashpit and awaited his further announcement.

"Nothing!" he volunteered cheerfully. "Only, I wanted to tell you fellows that I feel a heap sight better than I look!"

"That 's a long shot ahead of looking better than you feel, Sacks!" promptly shouted the rollicking voice of McPeltrie from the tank bench.

"You know it!" squeaked Sacks, with a ponderous nod of his bullet-shaped head; and ducking his ash-grizzled face into the pit, much as a startled prairie dog dodges into its burrow, the intermittent upheaval of ashes from the pit was resumed.

"Why will he?" persisted the voice of the first speaker, disregarding the unexpected contribution, and again fixing his glance upon Dodson, while a tolerant chuckle went round and subsided.

"Why will he?" repeated Dodson, scornfully. "Because he ain't the first of that dude kind that ever started in, expecting that he was going to knock hide and hot tamales off of the railroad business; nor he won't be the last to get fooled up a whole lot, 'cording to my notion.

"I can't stand to have around me a four-eyed cuss, nohow, 'less he 's fair old enough to need windows to let in ideas, like Pap Enderby here.

"I want to see back of a man's gauge lights, and have a show to figure out what pressure he 's carrying, when he 's capering around me on an engine."

It was a rather large morning gathering, and an overflow of men from the bench under the tank squatted complacently upon their heels, in a comfortable half-circle before it, discussing, chiefly, the sudden rush of traffic which had called out every available man, and was also working some on the line, at the moment, who should have been in and snugly asleep many hours ago. So, the currents of the great, earnest game were running swift and strong, although, to the casual onlooker, this would have been undetected upon the commonplace surface of the placid little human eddy, at the roundhouse tank.

The early sun was smiling down upon the face of the rugged country, roundabout the village, as it usually did smile, in compensation for other needs of that barren highland, and the drops of alkali water, dripping from the tank, sparkled like crystals, as they broke and spattered ceaselessly upon the white-pebbled ground, just clear of the judgment seat.

Seen in the heart of that wilderness of dusty gray barrens, the sparkling drops of water were as deceptive in appearance as Sacks, of the ashpit, although quite in the reverse order. That is to say, they looked much better than they felt, as those had cause to know who, at one time or other, had yielded to the temptation to drink of them, when the engine cask ran dry.

Everybody in the group seemed slept out and peaceably disposed, except Dodson, whose big wholesome body usually stood for as much of even-tempered endurance as was possible for the best of them.

The sorry fact was that he, just in from a soul-searching freight run of eighteen hours through the mountains, which had included all of the night hours, had renewed his strength with a liberal measure of hot coffee from the ever ready urn at the restaurant, eaten the hearty breakfast that was worthy of his big, healthy, tired body, and started for bed, when he was overtaken by the caller and turned back to swell the waiting group at the roundhouse, all of whom were booked for early leaving.

Dodson had been caught for an extra, after his long-drawn night run, while just in the act of relaxing for rest. That, of course, is a combination of circumstances well calculated to tip a tired man's tongue with venom; and when he learned that he had drawn, for the extra run, the engine upon which young Harper was experimenting, with a " dog-house" obstructing the view over the right cylinder, and other parts of the engine strung up with more of the apparatus which was locally known as "the trotting harness," he allowed himself to express some uncomplimentary opinions.

In short, crisp sentences he had paid his respects to the "thimble-rigging-outfit," while Harper approached, and had foretold disaster and defeat for Harper and his operations; all of which spicy recital, ceasing with Harper's arrival at the bench, had brought out, when he departed, the slow-spoken challenge of: "Why will he?"

"Little hard on the stranger, ain't you, Dodson?" said Pap Enderby, peering up over the top of his steel-rimmed glasses, when Dodson's explosive speech ceased.

They all knew about how it had fared with Dodson through the long night. Not one of them but knew the feeling of having his face set like an unyielding mask, and his cap clutching the circle of his head with a grip like that of a steel helmet, all for the want of sleep, and they were mentally making large allowances for Dodson's mood.

Yet they had been taking a big interest in Harper's operations, as the engine had fallen to one and another of them, from day to day, on the test runs. Then, too, Enderby had seen many men and many things in his long graduation from the engine deck and the fire-door, to the throttle side of the picked runs, which he was ably holding in spite of his glasses, as a good man was sometimes allowed to do. He was, therefore, inclined to look calmly upon new men and new doings, even though the men might wear gold-rimmed glasses upon occasion.

"A little hard for the stranger, I should say," he repeated.

"Give him a show for his white-alley, same as we all had to have when we were starting in," puffed fat and chubby Muller of the mail run east, without looking up from the pine sliver which he was whittling into nothing in particular.

"Yes. Give the man a show. He 's not so bad," added two or three others.

"That 's all right about the show," snapped Dodson, whose weary fur could not, just then, be rubbed any way but the wrong way. "He 'll get what 's coming to him from me, all square enough, and no more. And there 'll be plenty of railroading left, in the same old way, long enough after he 's done poking that young neb of his 'n into other people's business; same as there was before he come. I say I don't like the four-eyed breed, whatever!"

Meanwhile Harper, alert and full of a big liking for his work and for his new-found fellow workers, tingling with the sting of the clear mountain air, mentally doffing his cap to the near, towering peaks of the rim-rock, had passed on, out of sight and hearing, around the outer circle of the roundhouse, and was seated in the shop office, mapping out his work for the run which was about to begin.

He was happily unaware that his brief stop at the tank caucus had left a tang of bitterness, where all looked bright and heartening through his offending glasses, not excepting Dodson, whose grimy, upstanding figure he had unobtrusively noted and admired.

Harper was a stalwart, self-contained young giant, so well made that he hardly showed his real proportions. His very bright, but over-used eyes, which patience and glasses were to fully restore, were his only apparent physical defect, and when his little mother, years before his coming to the mountains, had, with all of the faith of a mother in the destiny of her son, laid upon him the duty of making of himself a doctor or a preacher, he had taken the matter quite seriously.

However, after a period of delving into the paths and bypaths of creeds, from Confucian to Phallic, from pagan to Nazarene, and a whimsical scrutiny of his rugged young self, he had found himself very far afield in the countless blind leads and ramifications of the isms and ologies, and concluded that he was on the wrong trail, for a life-work.

He gained his mother's reluctant consent to a special course in engineering for the remainder of his college work, upon his specious plea that, since more men, proportionately, find their way from railroad work into the tender hands of doctors and preachers, than from any other worldly pursuit, he might be departing but slightly from her original desire, by becoming a mechanical engineer. And, having gained his point and finished his course, he set his face sturdily, through many trials, toward the mountains.

When he returned to the roundhouse, upon the morning in question, the group at the tank had scattered, the yards were throbbing with the orderly confusion of departing trains, and Dodson, quietly resentful in the throes of keeping awake, was mounted in the cab and ready to go down to the train.

Harper had progressed far enough in the understanding of human nature to know when to let a man alone, and with his helper mounted in the engine cab and himself in the wind shelter at the cylinder, the engine joined with its train and launched out, up the long grade to the crest, and toward Balceta, with little said.

For some days, twining spirals of thin, blue smoke had been rising in the golden sunlight and merging into the turquoise of the cloudless sky, from the crags that stood guard around sleepy little Villa Rica, nestling at the bottom of her vast, ancient crater.

At night, never waning, watch-fires brilliantly beaded the encircling crags, rivalling, in the clear, dry air, the brilliance and seeming nearness of the big, bright stars that shone as calmly as when, ages ago, they had looked down upon stranger and more tragic deeds than even these things portended.

And, while the smokes of incense ascended from the vast stone brattice-work of natural turrets and battlements of the distant Sacromonte, whose ragged crest bristled, beyond the rim-rock, with many a rough-hewn cross, and the lesser peaks, within a day's march of Villa Rica, sent up their smokes by day and kept their brilliant watch by night, old men, deep in the shadowy seclusion of the adobe houses, were reciting anew the legends of a world-old ritual and firing the zeal of listening young men, in advance of the glories of self-abasement which were soon to follow.

Abroad in the streets and upon the dizzy mountain trails, dark eyes, in swarthy faces, had lost their apathetic calm and gleamed with the smouldering fires of suppressed excitement. Everywhere, it was apparent that something of surpassing interest was animating the traditional owners of the crater and the surrounding barrens.

The rough forked sticks, which, despite the advance of centuries elsewhere, there served as primitive ploughs, stood idle and neglected in their shallow furrows, and the great circles of hard-trodden clay, on the outskirts of the villages, were deserted of the dusky people who, in season and out of season, trod out their scanty stores of grain upon the naked earth, and winnowed it by handfuls in the vagrant winds.

Over it all, by night and by day, was the soft enticement of springtime in the High Country, tempering the austere silence of the Villa Rica Range; softening the vital, electric thrill of life, which is its most exquisite and priceless possession. The time of the *Penitentes* was at hand.

While his engine labored on, ploddingly, up the long grades, or rushed, under watchful restraint, down the steep and winding descents of the division, these daily manifestations were to Dodson's weary eyes little more than the yearly recurrence of an added burden of objects that must be quickly and unerringly placed, and given a value, as menaces in the landscape ahead of the engine.

But, to Harper, with his half-forgotten lore of creeds, it was as the presentment of a living page from the secret book of a race that was well-nigh spent; rich in the story of the lives of a strange people. He mentally resolved to see something of it at closer range, but, well knowing the difficulties and dangers of the proceeding, he little dreamed how close he was to its fullest realization.

For six endless hours, Dodson dragged the heavily loaded stock extra over the savage dips and spurs of the divide, and, with his conductor, picked the way safely among regular trains. His agony of drowsiness had passed into the succeeding stage of a wakefulness and mental alertness that stirred his every sense to painful activity; which put the dulled longing for sleep far away, as a hazy theory of life, rather than as one of its most vital needs.

Harper was soon laden with data from the instruments, and had found time to observe the straggling line of dusky foot-passengers, that set, with the train, toward the Sacromonte; and passing that, came trailing from opposite ways to the Sacred Mountain.

Solemn of face and furtive-eyed, they passed silently on their way, and Harper, in short opportunities for observing them from his perch upon the careening cylinder, wondered whether he could make the return trip in time to see the climax, which, he reasoned, could not be very far removed.

Thus the engine finally drew the trailing loads of moaning, thirst-parched cattle half up through the deep gorge which opened, at its farther end, down to Balceta and rest, and sleep.

The weary crew stopped under the red board of lonely little El Soledad station, which kept guard in a brief widening of the pass, and controlled the two curving side tracks that skirted the high walls of the canyon and hemmed the station in, at either side. The turn-table and telegraph were the only warrants for the existence of El Soledad, and when men found the red turned against them there and stopped, they usually took on trouble in heroic doses.

There fell the blow that, with a few terse lines of orders, stretched the span of Dodson's twenty-four-hour vigil to more than thirty hours without sleep, and definitely changed his manful endurance to slow torture and exquisite though unintentional punishment.

" Turn at El Soledad, and run as extra to Sacromonte, and there unload cattle. High bridge, Number Ninety-one, El Soledad and Balceta, burned out."

That was all. There was no help for it. Now distant Sacromonte siding had the only corral that would answer the need, upon the division.

Dodson's eyes gleamed like live coals in the black caverns of his grimy but ashen face, as he read. His lips curled back from his teeth, in a wolfish grin, which ordinarily would have been a smile, and, eating in silence the scant lunch which the operator's small larder afforded, they turned the engine, switched the caboose to the other end of the train, and started upon the long return trip.

The shades of night were fast settling in the lonely, rock-strewn valley of the Sacromonte, when the engine dragged over the last rise and began dropping down toward the blind siding and the corral, which, with its native keeper, commonly redeemed the place from utter solitude in that primitive wilderness.

Upon the mountain's top, steep and high beyond the corral, the fires were gleaming brightly; and from below, above, around, came countless wailing voices of unseen men, doling forth, shrieking, crying out incoherently, the unspeakable agonies of long-gone generations of men, whose traditions they were now perpetuating.

When the engine had glided half down the steep descent, the watchful eyes of Harper, who stood transfixed in his box at the front, by the horror of sounds that welled up from below made out the coming of a horde of dusky shadows in the shallow defile that led down from the mountain, among the rocks; and he saw, before Dodson from his place in the cab could do so, that the serpent-like column was heading to cross the track near the corral.

Turning, he waved to Dodson what he intended for a stop signal. But Dodson either did not understand or did not wish to and the engine rolled steadily down with its train, toward the siding and the corral. And then the end came quickly.

From the ragged mouth of the rocky gully which opened upon the right of way, poured forth a shrieking, writhing mob of well-nigh naked men, whose brown bodies were encrusted and matted with accumulated blood of their self-inflicted tortures.

With jagged clubs and withes of piercing cactus, they beat their bared bodies, falling upon themselves and upon each other with these weapons, and with knotted strands of rawhide, in a frenzy of joyous suffering that echoed from every jutting crag and fell back into the valley in shuddering waves of sound.

Too late, Dodson saw the cause of Harper's clumsy signal, as the head of the wild procession leaped out of the mouth of the defile, and was quickly followed by a cluster of flaring torches, at the centre of which rose the swaying figure of a young man, borne fainting, but exalted, upon a rough timber cross, from the scene of his voluntary re-enactment of the greatest of all tragedies.

The frightful din of mingled lamentation, rejoicing, and shrieks of pain was drowned for a moment in the booming, stammering warning which Dodson drew from the whistle, while the brakes were tightening down yet harder and the dry sand was ground to powder under the driving-wheels. But the oncoming column of revellers paid no heed, except to key their revellings the higher in a fierce defiance.

Year after year, they had carried out their gruesome programme at this forsaken spot, with no interruption from the secretly despised white men. There must be no interruption now, at the successful climax of their long-suffering preparations. Against such intrusion stood secret, solemn tradition, race hatred, superstition; and the white men, who ordinarily ruled the tracks without question, were now as nothing to the men whose fathers, and their fathers' fathers, knew these secret places when the white man was unknown there. The yelling horde pressed on.

When the collision was inevitable, Dodson arose, involuntarily, from his seat-box, and shouted fiercely to Harper to come out of the flimsy box upon the cylinder. But Harper was as a man turned to stone, as he stared at the writhing, yelling riot that, to his mind, had suddenly sprung across the gap from past and gone centuries.

The engine pilot ploughed slowly into the midst of the wild *mêlée* as the leaders reached the centre of the track, and, in the muffled impact that followed, the cross, with its insensible burden, swayed and toppled suddenly and cast the thong-bound, bloody victim down upon Harper's wind shelter, with a crash that shivered the box to splinters and sent Harper reeling over the side to the dirt-ballasted bank of the track.

Instantly, the mob of frenzied men fell upon him as he struggled to his feet, and the unequal battle was on. The timber cross and its burden slipped slowly to the ground and fell clear of the track as the engine came to a halt.

Once, twice, Dodson's hand moved swiftly in the gloom of the engine cab, while Harper was struggling against the fearful odds for a footing in the fight, and then a double roar broke forth from the engine, drowning the frenzied sounds which arose from below.

First to right and then to left, alternately, a slug of mud and hot water shot forth from the blow-off cocks in the leg of the boiler, cutting wide swaths of darkness among the flaring torches and, with each fierce blast, scattering the writhing crowd away from Harper's desperate stand, under a dense blanket of searching vapor.

When, a few moments later, the bellowing, stuttering uproar ceased, there was a silence over all the narrow valley and upon the mountain, more terrible in its import than the blood-chilling cries which had greeted the coming of the train in the beginning.

Harper staggered from the edge of the cloud of vapor that was lifting from around the engine and ran against Dodson, who was leaping toward him with the coal-pick from the tender poised dangerously in his heavy, uplifted hand.

Probably no man is entirely sane after he has been awake thirty hours continuously, and Dodson was about to demonstrate the fact, by going into battle single-handed against unknown numbers of the routed revellers, in the outlying darkness.

There was no present need, however, as Harper breathlessly assured him, while he deftly pinioned the uplifted arm and turned Dodson back, quickly, toward the engine.

And then the wildest vagary of that sudden, waking nightmare began to unfold before them!

Out of the fast-thickening shadows which were settling upon the gruesome scene crept a meek and grovelling figure of a man, from the scattered legions. Very guardedly, at first, it wormed toward them and, when no menace met it, straightened up into the person of the tall leader of the revellers.

"You, Camargo!" exclaimed Dodson, doubtingly, as the figure approached closer and thrust out a gaunt hand from its enveloping blanket. For this was a kind of Camargo that no railroad man had ever guessed: the secret, traditional leader of his fast-thinning race.

"*Si, señor,*" came the eager but soft response of the one-time premier monte gambler of Villa Rica.

"What are you doing in this wild-eyed business?" demanded Dodson, fiercely.

It was a mistake, all a mistake, urged the wily Camargo, ever softly. Would the señor tarry with them for a little space; would he not forgive? It was the error of the young men. It should all be well.

And gaining courage from the prolonged parleying of their leader, the shadowy hosts began to re-assemble, silently and sullenly, in the background, until the rocks were dotted with them and the paths from the Sacred Mountain became alive in the darkness, with cautious, moving figures.

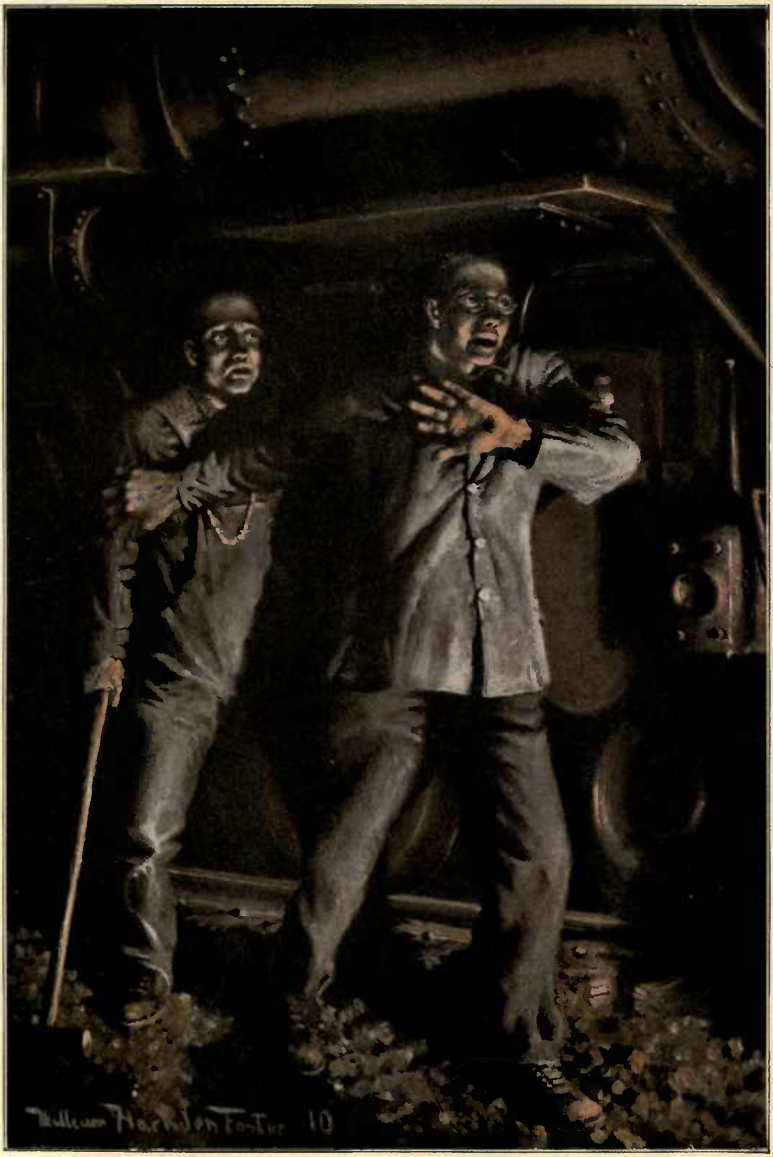
Turning to look about them, Harper and Dodson saw that the cross and its tenant had disappeared and the wavering flames of a stray torch or two revealed no trace of the recent upheaval.

The long line of cattle cars trailed dimly out into the night, behind the now silent engine, and the parched beasts, made frantic by their thirst and the recent riot of sounds, lolled their swollen tongues through the imprisoning bars, yearning madly for water, as the fresh odor and the gurgle of the little river swept up to them across the sloping bench that lay between the river and the tracks.

Would the guests tarry? urged the soft voice of Camargo, insensibly edging them along by the train until they stood beside a rectangular block of basalt, slightly rounded on its top, which rose somewhat above the level of the earth by the track. Now that the ceremonies were over, it should become a *fiesta,* in honor of the coming of their brothers.

Camargo's re-lighted torch, meanwhile, had been slowly wavering above his head, from east to west, from north to south, and the dusky, silent groups were joining up and pressing in slowly toward Harper and Dodson, where they stood with the train crew, who had rallied to the front.

Then, suddenly, the fires flared up fiercely upon the top of Sacromonte, and there came the low, insistent throbbing of a sound no white man in Villa Rica had ever heard: the



"Dodson, it means blood! Steady now, but back!"

heavy pulsing of a low-pitched drum, the sounds of which rose, alternately, to a deep-voiced challenge and died away to a rumbling murmur, to quicken again into a menacing, dulling roar which penetrated every cranny of the rocks and set the air of the constricted valley shuddering.

At the first note of it, Harper turned in startled wonder toward the Sacred Mountain.

"They seem to be out to celebrate for us, all right enough!" Dodson was saying, with a note of surprise in his voice; and without knowing why, he clutched the handle of the coal-pick closer.

When Harper quickly turned from staring at the fire upon the mountain-top, his eyes were wide with excitement. He grasped Dodson's arm in a grip that left its mark, saying tensely:

"Back to the engine! That is the sound of the olden Aztec war-drum, from the *teocalli's* top! It is the call to war and sacrifice. Dodson, it means blood! Steady, now, but back!"

At the first move, Camargo flung his torch hurtling into the air and casting aside his dark, robe-like blanket, stood stripped to his breech-clout and belt of woven feathers. With a volley of short, sharp orders, in a tongue no white man knew, he and his followers fell upon Dodson, stripped him to his shoes, tore his garments to ribbons and flung them far from the spot. They bore him, fighting, down upon the basalt rock, while a storm of blows from cactus clubs and knotted thongs rained upon Harper, struggling madly to regain the fallen coal-pick; and upon the train crew, who fought at his back, trying to force their way to the rock and to Dodson.

From the middle of the writhing bunch, the centre of which was Harper, brown men shot upward and out, bodily, and landed upon their fellows, until he had cleared a space in which to stoop swiftly and grasp the coveted pick.

With a resonant yell that had helped him on to victory on many a hard-fought athletic field, Harper swung the pick in deadly, widening circles about him, until it crashed down upon the head of gibbering Camargo, who crouched in incantations over the stretched and naked body of Dodson, with the long blade of a strange-looking knife quivering above the heart of the furious but helpless engineer.

With the fall of Camargo there came a sudden lull, in which Dodson wrenched himself free and sprang up from the rock, and the little party backed hastily against the train, in the dim light of the glow from the Sacromonte.

"Turn the cattle upon them, before they rally!" rang Harper's voice, and in a moment a car door, quickly followed by another, slid back upon the hangers and the brown bodies of water-mad beasts were leaping out into the night and racing down the sloping bench to the river, tossing upon their wide-spreading horns all things living that came within range of them.

Catching up the discarded blanket of Camargo and tossing it upon the shoulders of Dodson, Harper led a quick retreat to the engine. Once there, the fierce, stammering roar of the blow-off cocks again broke forth terrifyingly upon the valley, turning back the rallying hosts from the Sacromonte and making the route complete and final.

Huddled in the blanket of Camargo, Dodson sat upon his seat-box in the engine, listening to the receding babble of voices that came out of the stillness following the closing of the blow-offs. He stared, wide-eyed, from his drawn and haggard face into the faces of Harper and the others upon the engine deck.

"What broke loose?" he said, presently, fixing his weary and frightened eyes upon Harper. "I can't make it out, to fit a deal like Camargo's!"

"If I were to describe it," said Harper, very earnestly, "I should call it the neatest example of mental reversion to primitive type, under great excitement, that any of us is likely to see.

"But, I have no doubt that, when it is fully understood at headquarters, it will be thought best to put the delay down to an engine failure at Sacromonte, and gather up the few stray cattle as quietly as possible."

That, indeed, for various reasons, is exactly what was done, after they had trailed into Villa Rica, later that evening, with the empty cattle train.

Dodson, climbing stiffly down from the engine, hatless, with his eyes set unwinkingly in his shrunken face, and his newly acquired garment gathered closely about him, strode into the lunch room across the tracks from the roundhouse. He ate ravenously of everything he could reach, and as long as he could keep awake, standing.

Then he marched away, up Villa Rica's one important street, to his home, minding not at all the varied, hilarious greetings of comrades, which assailed him along the way, and dropping down in the folds of Camargo's official blanket, upon his unopened bed, slept for twelve hours, before he was ready to report upon the roundhouse work-book or discuss the merits of the doings at Sacromonte.

Clean-shaven, ruddy-cheeked, except for one livid welt across his face, and freshly clad, he was dictator, in the seat of honor at the middle of the bench, at the next water-tank caucus after his reappearance.

"No," he had just been saying, before Harper hove in sight, evidently headed for the judgment seat, where the crystal drops were dripping upon the white pebbles, as brightly as though no dark secrets lingered in that sunny land. "No, I 've got no call to kick on a man that knows more about this country than I do.

"Any fellow that can read the signs in a new game, the way that young fellow did; pick the second when a fight is due; win it, and top it with a cavalry charge by a load of Texas long-horns; all, when you need it as bad as I did, is worth keeping acquainted with, good and plenty.

"And never even broke them glasses of his 'n! Four-eyed people 's all right with me; and they can ride my engine a whole lot, if they want to. Have a seat, pardner?" he concluded, moving along a little space upon the bench, as Harper stepped into the circle of friendly faces, where Pap Enderby smiled benignly upon them all, and chubby little Muller was whittling placidly.

"That 's right!" rumbled Muller, not taking the trouble to lift his fat chin, as Harper sat down. "Give the stranger a show!"

And Harper, of course, may not have understood, quite fully, how much Muller had thus spoken; although the chance that he did not took nothing from the general satisfaction that pervaded the morning caucus.

CHAPTER VI

DINWIDDY'S DEBT

McPELTRIE set his valve-oil can upon the ground, as carefully as though it contained the elixir of life. He lowered the black-oil can with his other hand, until it rested beside the valve oil. He shifted a liberal-sized bunch of white cotton waste from under his arm to the much whittled and oil-polished plank seat that spans the gap between the upright supports of the roundhouse water tank,— the far-famed judgment seat of out-going engine crews, who may have a little time to caucus upon topics of present interest.

Mark Enderby was holding the bench in solitary and unpretentious glory. His close-cropped gray hair glinted in the afternoon sunshine like frosted silver, and his keen, half-closed eyes were sparkling in a close study of the engine that was clucking her wheels across the turn-table and sending up a gentle purring from the blower drawing at her fire.

McPeltrie sat down on the end of the bench and, with his liberally designed feet, corralled the oil cans, as though he half feared that they might escape; and, since Dinwiddy's system of strict accounting for oil allowances had been in force, filled oil cans had, indeed, been known to disappear, although probably not just in the way that McPeltrie's attitude seemed to anticipate — by flying.

His strong young jaw was set rather aggressively and his gray-blue eyes glinted with something approaching an unspoken challenge to battle, but he said nothing, until Enderby had finished his admiring look at the new engine and turned toward him with a satisfied smile.

"Well, Mack!" said the old man cheerily. "All ready for another gilt-edged trip?"

"Yes," replied McPeltrie, with an injured air. "You can't do anything with old Halpin, though. I'm pounded to a fare-ye-well about this oil business, and I guess you get your packing set out plenty, about it.

"See the last report? We are half-way down the list, again.

"I just met Dinwiddy in the roundhouse and I told him, 'Why don't you get another porcupine and put in the oil house, with Halpin?'"

"Did n't you know any better?" asked Enderby, mildly.

"Eh?" said McPeltrie, in some surprise.

"What did Dinwiddy say?" questioned Enderby, gently ignoring the younger man's question.

"He said: 'You have to have porcupines, if you need to raise quills,' and walked away, kind of slow, with his head down, and left me standing there with my oil cans in my hands.

"What's the use of a master mechanic talking parables, like that, when a man's trying to talk business with him, huh?" blurted McPeltrie.

"Did n't you get what was coming to us on the oil house tickets?" queried Enderby, still very gently.

"Y-e-s," the young man admitted, and a dull flush of color ran up into his face. "Got what was coming to us, but it don't last long enough, and we are both getting hammered, till I'm sick of hearing oil."

Mark looked at him a moment, with eyes that seemed to see into and beyond his earnest face, and, glancing to where the engine had come to rest alongside the coal chutes, noted the approach of Manuel, the Mexican caller, on his way over from the despatcher's office.

Doubled down comfortably, with his arms extended along his thighs, and fingers interlaced, he idly assembled with the toe of his shoe little clusters of white pebbles that covered the ground, and said no more until the caller came abreast of the judgment seat.

" How is she, Manuel? " he then asked, without looking up.

" Late thirty minutes. She will make up five, they figure," replied the caller, and disappeared, without halting, through the open roundhouse door.

" Mack," said Enderby, straightening up until the fireman was no longer left to study the oil-glazed top of the old man's cap, " that notch in the middle of Dinwiddy's chin must have showed up pretty white and plain, when he told you how about porcupines, did n't it? "

" It always does, when he shuts his jaw that way," said McPeltrie. " I was just thinking about it; looked like a good time to leave, then, so I did n't follow it up none. He 's boss, when you get right down to it."

" I ought to have told you about that, sooner," said Enderby, regretfully.

" Oh, I know he 's boss all right —"

" No; about the notch in his chin," said the old man, gravely. " I gave him that."

" Yes, you did! " laughed the fireman, gayly. " Quit fooling."

" Providing she don't make up more than five minutes of that thirty, I reckon I can tell you about it now, before we have to back down on her," came Mark's answer, with no sign of resentment at the fireman's doubt. "And I think you better know.

"Talking about Halpin. You can't coax him into giving a gallon of valve oil on a three-pint ticket, I know. Nor he won't deal out a seat-boxful of white waste on a one-pound order. Yet he 's not a bad kind, if you play fair with him. Halpin 's square enough; always was, while I knew him.

"That stiff leg of his —"

"Cork, ain't it?" interrupted the fireman.

"No; stiff knee and ankle," insisted Enderby, steadily.

"It 's likely the thump of that foot, as he walks on the iron grating around the oil pumps, as much as his solemn old face and his long white hair — black as a raven's wing when I first knew him — that gives the air of putting on dog, seeming a little too heavy for the job, like you says to Dinwiddy.

"That 's why I 'm saying to you, if you want to get an idea of what Halpin used to be like, you must happen into the oil house some time when Dinwiddy is there talking with him.

"When this road was reaching out past Villa Rica, here, toward Balceta, I was a young fellow, just fairly good at firing, like you be; but, likely, some older.

"That 's some twenty to twenty-seven years ago; I can't tell exactly, without counting back too much, but when the road made its closest swing toward the Tonto Basin, I was on the construction train, firing.

"Cochise and his band of Apache fiends were running wild in New Mexico and Arizona, and crossing over the border into Mexico, when they needed, bad, to get away for a time.

" A man had no business out here then unless he could handle a gun as well as a spike-mall or a train. We were all fit enough, I dare say, on such needs.

" One morning, just after sun-up, we were at the eating shack, ready to pull out to the end of the line, a mile ahead, with a lot of material, when we saw a hard-run horse gallop out of the last draw, from the Tonto country, and race, angling, toward the end of the track, with a midget of a man or a boy on his back.

" After him in a few seconds, came a bunch of Apaches, whooping it up on their horses at a gait that meant a short race for the fellow they wanted.

" It did n't take my engineer five seconds to size it up and 'point himself captain of the construction gang. He ordered me to cut the engine loose, when he slacked her back, and I did it. He called the gang together with the whistle, in a shake more, and they piled onto the tender and the engine with their guns, eager, plenty, for the fight.

" We got to the end of the track and stopped, just in time to let go a broadside from the engine, as the chap the Apaches were after cut loose a shot from an old brass-bound rifle that he poked out over the ribs of his downed horse, and killed the leader of the bunch, at a clean hundred yards from where he laid, between the dead horse and the grade bank. It was a beauty, and fetched a yell from our boys that you could have heard over at the mouth of the draw.

" Our shower of lead downed a half-dozen more of them and turned the rest back, and the little chap staggered to his feet, scrambled over the horse's body, and ran out alone to the Apache he had downed, before we could swarm out and overtake him.

"When we got to him, he was wrapping in his handkerchief the fresh-drawn scalp of a gray-haired woman — his mother's, as it turned out — and he had taken it from the belt of the Apache.

"Before we had quite got the idea, he slashed a knife twice about the top of the quivering Apache's head, ripped the fellow's scalp off and stamped it into the ground with his heel.

"Then the poor, hungry-looking little cuss keeled over and fainted complete away, with his face turned up to the morning sun; and he had not yet said a word to any of us.

"It was my engineer who picked him up and carried him over to the engine, bathed his face, and forced brandy down his throat, until he got his grip again and told his story.

"The boy was Dinwiddy, sixteen years old; and it was Halpin, of the oil house, who carried him, and Halpin who buried the boy's butchered father and mother, that morning, in the draw, under the *piñon* trees."

"Say!" said McPeltrie, blowing a needlessly loud blast from his nose, into the wisp of white waste that he had separated from the bundle upon the seat-plank. "Keep your eye on these oil cans for a minute, will you?"

"Where are you going?" said Enderby.

"I want to square myself with Halpin and Dinwiddy," the young man replied quite candidly. "When I make an ass of myself and find it out as plain as this, I want to own up to it quick."

"I would n't," advised Enderby, quietly. "Not that way. Halpin don't like apologies. They work him all up.

Neither does Dinwiddy. You are all square enough with them, now. Sit down. 'T ain't finished yet.

"Dinwiddy was a smart little cuss from the start," resumed Enderby, as McPeltrie dropped back upon the plank beside him, "and as it turned out, his old Scotch-Irish dad was no little of a scholar, before ever he came to the mountains.

"He had taught the boy figures and things that made the most of us rough-and-tumble fellows dizzy to look at, and when the railroad took hold of him and gave him a job he plumb surprised them by the way he dug into the business.

"The engines took him most, though, and he would go hungry, without sleep, and happy, for a day in the drafting-room, after the division-point shops and offices were put at Balceta; or for a night ride over the mountains on an engine, after the big new rolling-stock began to come onto the finished line.

"It got so that the hostlers never moved an engine on the tracks about the roundhouse, without first looking under it for young Dinwiddy; and wherever you found him, he had a bunch of little blueprints that tell all about engines, in pounds weight and few words, sticking out of his clothes, somewhere; and he knew every engine of the division, like a book, besides a lot about engines that had not yet got out that far on the line.

"That 's the way it was, when I got into an argument with a new marshal, one night I had off, and when it was all over, I had to get across the border into Mexico, and stay there until things got on a little past it.

"I went running over there in Mexico, and stayed about four years before I run over a young Mexican one night, and cut him up with the engine; his fault, but you know how it was there — jail, or get away. No excuse was good, for a railroad man, so I came back over to Balceta, and took a job firing.

" Nothing surprised a fellow very much out here at that time; just took things as they came, and said the less the better. So, if I was n't surprised, I was mighty pleased when they put me on firing again for Halpin.

" He was then pulling a bang-up train, for those days, that they called ' Sierra Flyer,' and the time was fast, for this country, and mighty trying for a man of Halpin's years and training. I saw that, and it did n't take me long to know that Halpin had bit off a'most more than he could chew, when he took the run.

" He was n't exactly all in, but near it, and I did n't know the signs and signal-smokes as well then as I do now. He had just reached years and burden enough to make things drag a bit for him. Too often, he ran late; just a little, but late. Too often, he lost time on the up-grade, by just that small steady edge that cuts away a fast schedule before you know it; and in the old, old way, tried to make it up at a great rate down-grade.

" That way, with the best intentions in the world, and being a good runner gone stale, he got a reputation for bad judgment. And from the time that the train-master shaped Halpin's shortcomings into two words, ' bad judgment,' every fellow that had a club seemed to swing it at him and he began to lose faith in himself. After that, you know, the end comes soon on a fast run.

" There 's rules of nature, same as there 's rules of railroads. A limb weakens on that cottonwood, over yon, and the wind sweeps it off. The new shoot replaces; the dead wood goes out. Halpin was going out, as an engineer, but I would n't own up to myself, at first, that it was so.

"It went along that way, until a summer night when we were pulling Sierra Flyer through one of the blazing and ripping thunder storms of the divide.

"While I was taking water at a mountain tank, Halpin got down to oil around some and when I was ready to go, I found him sitting under a ledge of rock alongside of the engine, with his head in his hands.

"I hopped over to him, quick, because we were late then, on the up-grade, as usual, and asked him if he was sick. He said 'No,' and told me, flat, that he would never get on the engine again. I grabbed him under the arms and set him on his feet; started him toward the engine just in time to beat the conductor's lantern around the corner of the rock.

"I bluffed it for him, straight and square, when the conductor commenced to snoop; told him that Halpin had strained his ankle; and Halpin limped a few right quick, to make good, and we went.

"Of course, I said nothing about it at the roundhouse, though I say, now, that it was wrong. He should have been taken off then, for his own sake; for every reason.

"A week later, we were late again, with a new and heavy engine that we had never seen before, and were making up the time on the down-grade of the foothills. The train-master was on that night, with young Dinwiddy, who was then a sort of helper to the master mechanic. They were riding in the day coach, from Villa Rica to Balceta.

"Halpin ran a couple of small stations at a rate that made me do a sand dance on the deck. When the train-master came ahead at the next stop — young Dinwiddy with him — and asked Halpin how fast he was running when he went by the flag stations, Halpin snapped him off mighty short; told him that he had no way of timing himself, along there, but that he did not think that anybody got on.

" Dinwiddy had climbed onto the engine, meaning to ride a piece with us, but Halpin's answer made the train-master hotter than a singed wolf; so he calls Dinwiddy down off the engine, short like, and they went back to the day coach together. I could n't help telling Halpin that kind of talk did n't help our case none; but he was too mad, himself, to say anything, and we got the signal and pulled out.

" Curves are plenty over on that side, you know, and Halpin soon hit one of them too hard. We were off like a flash, with a rail spread, and she ran a few lengths on the ties, slewed across the track, and stopped, leaning half over, with the train rolled and crumpled together, on the road-bed and in the ditch, close behind her; seven coaches and sleepers, in a close heap of plunder.

" I was standing in the gangway, watching for a switch-light, when the jolt came. It threw me clear of the mess and into a borrow pit half full of water. When I came out of my trance, my head was held above water by a strand of barbed wire fence that shut in the section-man's garden, and the gouging of one of the barbs into my jaw, below the ear, brought me out of my sleep soon, and first man to the engine.

" Halpin was pinned by the leg, under the back part of the engine frame, and the coaches, fired by lamps when they turned over, were beginning to smoke, all along the line behind her.'

" Me and Halpin had an understanding, in the old construction days, that, if either one of us got pinned down in a wreck, or fair treed by Cochise's people, the other of us would n't stand to see a roasting, nor scalding, nor scalping alive, so long as a .44 bullet would help any to the contrary. Halpin's spirits running kind of low, about the time of this Sierra Flyer business, by one of the odd chances that come in such things, he had brought up that old topic just a few days before we were ditched. We had agreed that Cochise's run was all in, but that the deal still held good, as far as being pinned down in a mix-up was concerned.

" I pried and pulled around him, for a minute, before my head cleared up just right after I crawled out of the borrow pit, and then it looked sure to me that he was nailed by the shin, for good and all; and him laying there, still as a badger, and searching my face for the verdict, in the light of the torch I had pulled out of his busted seat-box, which was spread around on the ground beside the engine.

" Final, I had to straighten up and step back to think of something else to try, right speedy, and he spoke out clear, and says:

" ' Give it to me, Enderby!'

" ' Not yet,' says I, looking back to the cloud of smoke that was thickening above the overturned coaches and shutting out what little light there was from the night sky.

" ' Give it to me, I tell you!' he yelled. ' It 's your word for it! I 'll save it as long as I can!'

" ' Will you wait till I can get back to you?' I asked him.

" ' I 'll wait, if it don't roast me,' he promised. ' Give it to me!'

" I passed him the Derringer from my vest pocket — it was the best I had with me — and I left him lying there, just as the cloud of smoke flashed into sudden flame and turned the wreck and the mountain-side red with the light of it.

" The flames leaped toward him among the crooked line of coaches as I ran back looking for an axe. It was one of the mix-ups where everything is turned over and shook around and nobody killed or even much hurt. People crawled out of places where you 'd think a gopher could n't go through alive; some laughing, silly like, and some crying and swearing, but all helping themselves, and the train crew and the train-master and Dinwiddy working among them; anyhow, my straight play was back to Halpin.

"I kicked in a whole sash, nearest the tool-rack of a coach and ran back to the engine with the axe, expecting at every step to hear the crack of my gun in Halpin's hand.

"I got to him while he was still lying there on his belly, grinding his teeth and clutching the gun, watching the plumes of flame swaying and swirling toward him; and the sneaking dull fire-line that crept at him along the ground, under the rubbish of the wreck.

"I told him my plan, short and clear, and he agreed, with a shiver of pain. I pulled down the slack of the bell-cord off the side of the boiler and cut off a length. I split his trouser-leg, to above the knee, and wrapped the calf of his leg, around and around, with the rope, tight as I could draw it, and finished with the twist of a stick above the knee, like what Doc. Maxon and all the medicine sharps call a tourniquet.

"Then, I told him 'All right!' and slipped a little chopping block tight under his shin, upon the rock.

"'Go ahead!' he said, and dropped his face in his arms.

"I raised the axe, back over my shoulder, for a full drive, and struck."

"*Jehosaphat!*" exclaimed McPeltrie, springing up from the plank seat, with clenched hands, his wide eyes searching the face of the quiet-mannered old engineer. "You said it is n't cork!"

"Sit down, Mack." The old man's voice was soft as a harp-note, now.

"The axe hooked into something back of me, on the upstroke, and at the same time young Dinwiddy's voice rang close to my ear: '*Don't!*'

"Next thing, the axe was wrenched from my hands and went clattering down upon the rock ballast on the track.

"Strung up to the pitch that I was, it made me wild to see the young cuss standing there that way, telling me that he could lift the engine off of Halpin, after knocking the axe out of my grip, and I gave him a hard shove aside.

"The new engine looked as big as a hill, to me.

"'You can lift the mountain!' I yelled, savage-like.

"He staggered back from my shove and then pushed back up to me again, in the brighter light, and I saw what the axe had first struck. It had hooked him in the point of the chin, and that white notch you saw to-day was a different-looking affair just then, in the glare of the flames and the light of the flickering torch.

"'Don't, Enderby!' he repeated, standing there with his good red blood dyeing the whole front of him. 'We can lift him clear!'

"You 've seen, before now, that I ain't to say much educated in figures, but he showed me, quick and clear, on one of the little blueprints from his pocket, what weight that new engine was, and what of it she was likely holding down on Halpin.

"That 's a way Dinwiddy has; he can show you, clear and short. It 's what made him, I reckon.

" It did n't take ten seconds, seemed to me, and I knowed more of that stuff than I ever knowed in my life before. Course, I was keyed up high, on account of Halpin and everything together, but I got it in three winks; the whole weight; the pry we 'd need; the men's weight we 'd want for to lift what was crowding down on Halpin. The boy made it all clear.

" Seems like it did n't take ten seconds, I say, before we had a gang of strong fellows knocking the ends off of splice-bolts in the track; ripping up four rails; trotting them on a double-quick to the engine and binding them into a close bunch, side by side, first a head and then a flange up, held tight and close with a drag-chain from the tender tool-box.

" We shoved the pry in over a little pier of cross-ties that the others had built up beside where Halpin was caught, and then Dinwiddy massed the heaviest men, me among them, on the far end of the pry — a score of big fellows — and gave the word, quick and hearty.

" We dropped our weight on the pry, and the engine gave. She rose, into the crackling arch of flames above her, ever so little, but enough to let Dinwiddy drag Halpin's broken leg free of the clutch of the frame and the track, and roll him into the ditch, with the whole back of his blouse smoking and a savage little circle of fire eating through the middle of it.

" The splintered hood of the first coach and the blazing engine cab hung together a little longer, above where he had been lying, and then a gust of wind and flame swept them down in a mass of glowing embers and fire-brands, covering the spot, deep.

" Just beyond the reach of it when it fell, Halpin was lying, senseless, with my gun half clutched in his limp hand.

" Dinwiddy jumped back to him with a shout and took the gun from his hand; bathed his face and dosed him with water and kindness; cut off the rope and rough-splinted his leg, until better help showed up.

"To shake it all down with one fire: That 's where Dinwiddy first showed up real big for master mechanic; Halpin, for a long run in the oil house; and I, for a place on the judgment seat, here, and for this afternoon Limited run to Balceta, which is getting a little heavy for an old-timer, like me," Enderby finished rather wistfully, and with a passing weariness.

"So, Mack, when you find Dinwiddy trying to pay Halpin, on that old Cochise debt of his, or Halpin paying instalments of good-will on the leg, or more, that Dinwiddy saved him when I was trying to make good on my promise, why, don't go and get huffy about it.

"It does us no harm to have them go on thinking they are both much obliged to each other — because, they really are that, I reckon, when you see it right."

"I see," said McPeltrie, almost inaudibly, with a look of full accord.

Rising, he gripped the old man's hand with a clasp that hurt. Tucking the bundle of waste under his arm, he lifted his precious oil cans and, with the assurance and liberality of youth, said again:

"I see! You three fellows are sure aces with me, from now on. Let 's go. I heard her whistle for the target, up in the pass."

CHAPTER VII

A JAB AT JIM LUCERO

DODSON, comfortably established near the end of the bench at Villa Rica's roundhouse water tank, was one of half a dozen of the regulars who sat idly, for the time-being, looking out into the sunny, peaceful calm that brooded over the bottom of the crater.

Just across the tracks, old Camargo, long healed of the hurts of the fierce battle of the Sacromonte, was ambling in the wake of a bevy of lazy burros toward the distant fagot lands, and from the small irrigated field of sprouting alfalfa which lay like an emerald in the dull gold of the crater's bottom, chattering magpies rose before the slow advance of the little burro train and flung their glinting plumage of black and white fluttering upward against the wide expanse of the bluest of blue skies.

Only a trail of thinning smoke above the eastern pass remained to tell of the recent departure of Muller with the mail, and Dodson now whimsically bridged the conversational gap caused by Muller's going.

" Well," said he, " there have been interruptions to traffic ever since Balaam was held up with the jaw-bone of an ass; and maybe a good sight longer than that. But, when it comes to treeing the felon, I 'm minded to stick by the scriptures and let every man kill his own snakes!

"I'm on the call-board to run engine, every time I'm first out, but I don't hone for any jobs as deputy marshal, nor any of that kind of grandstand play, however needful."

"You're a little mixed in your figures and all prinked up on history and such, since you and young Harper got away with old Camargo's blanket at the *Penitente* sociable, down Sacromonte way!" volunteered McPeltrie. "I could n't take my affidavit, but, far as I remember, it was Samson killed the snakes and Balaam had nothing to do with it but ride the burro."

"I forgot about you and Samson and Balaam bunking in the same shack, along about that time," laughed Dodson. "Get my meaning about hold-ups though, don't you?"

"*Si, señor!*" said McPeltrie with an emphatic nod, "and I'm here to announce, without popping off too heavy while we're drifting, that no hold-up that ever wagged a gun will take an engine away from me, as long as I can bat an eye and wave a leg!"

A man arriving for the first time upon the great southwestern plateau, or its close environs, quickly becomes aware of an elusive something which seems just to evade the grasp of his understanding. It may even be that he will have need to loosen his heart-strings, as it were, to compass a fuller beat of humanity, and expand his soul to a fuller, primal sense of nearness to the great source of life itself before, by patient and unobtrusive learning of a broad new theme, he finds the key to the great open, yet secret chamber of the high country. There, as everywhere, there are some things, of course, which at once arrange themselves in the lists of the commonplace. But there are influences which, apparently joining up the good with the bad, the nicest refinement of courtesy with the strongest of fibre, long keep him keenly alive to the fact that, there, he is a stranger to himself, almost as much as to those about him.

There is first, an ever-smiling sky that almost audibly speaks a welcome, without respect of persons. And, again, there is an inherent distrust between unlike raçes, each of which has suffered deeply at the hands of the other. These things, with the passing of centuries, have impressed upon the Villa Rica country that deep understanding of men and affairs which only great age and a much varied civilization can supply. The composite result is a strong and admirable type of manhood which is often masked by a very positive sort of reticence and which not infrequently finds its partial expression as in Dodson's, or in some one's else, "Let every man kill his own snakes."

The outspoken defy of McPeltrie was, therefore, not in accord with the unwritten rules of the game, as Villa Rica interpreted the great game of life. The subject of hold-ups was rarely discussed and, indeed, never in a belligerent way, by the older men. Accordingly, the immediate result of McPeltrie's announcement was an impressive silence. That the topic was being discussed at all upon this occasion was due only to the fact that Muller with the mail had just hauled away to the territorial prison Saddle Jack, with his arm shot off at the shoulder as the result of his late attempt to hold up the Overland Express, while out on parole for a similar offence committed some years before.

"What do you say, Pap?" said Dodson very quietly, when the silence had become oppressive. "Ever been held up on an engine? Seems like I remember something."

"Twice," replied Enderby, slowly lifting his steady hand out of the play of sunshine and shadow upon the knees of his overalls and extending two fingers upward in a sort of visual signal of confirmation.

"Twice," he repeated, as he lifted his eyes retrospectively to the thin column of smoke that was drifting up lazily from the stack of Dodson's waiting engine, and his hand dropped back easily upon his knees.

"Go ahead!" admonished Dodson with close-lidded, sparkling eyes. "Clear board, Pap!"

"There ain't so much to it," said Enderby, flushing slightly. "The first time was down along the base of Sacromonte, one night about ten years ago, and it was Saddle Jack that did it. We had about forty-five thousand in gold bullion aboard, and enough paper cash to make up a tidy sum besides, though we did n't know it until some little time after the showdown.

"We were making good on the time-card, about as usual, when we stopped for a flag among the rocks down there, and when we picked it up, Jim Lucero's gang pulled the red handkerchief off the lantern they had used and went to work in the same old way.

"No use going into that part of it. With the guns and dynamite they had ready, they just handled the express car crew like tamales — hot ones though — and there was nothing to that end of it but a lively skirmish, with one or two of the boys bullet-creased, and then we had to make the usual run down the track a piece with the engine and express car and give up the paper money, with some of the gold."

"What were you fellows doing on the engine all this time, Pap?" McPeltrie interrupted in his eagerness.

"I 'll be to that, right soon," said Enderby, looking soberly at Dodson.

"This same Saddle Jack, that's all shot up and on the way over behind Muller this morning, hopped up in the gangway before we had quite come to a stop and called my attention, some sharp and imperative, to a pair of guns he was holding onto me and my fireman and said for us to stop quick and get down to help uncouple the express car.

"That was my first hold-up," he interjected thoughtfully. "The second one came about four minutes later!

"First place, we had to get down, of course, me and the fireman, and with that pair of guns pushing us in the small of our backs, we uncoupled the express car from the rest of the train and headed back for the engine, according to orders, feeling sort of like slow music, but madder than badgers, you can know.

"The fellow was handling the two of us alone and it seemed kind of cheap for two able-bodied men like us. So, when he let me up the engine step first I saw my chance and made a quick play for my gun, which was shoved down in a holster behind the seat-box them days, meaning to plug him some when his head came up above the level of the gangway, after the fireman.

"I did n't though, because, just when I had it gripped fair in my hand and turned to raise it and — reason with the wolf, the glass in the back sash of the cab come splintering down on my neck and I was seeing from the front room clean back into the kitchen of a miserable big gun that Jim Lucero poked through the opening and was holding on me.

"That was my second hold-up; and there was n't much said. He just remarked, 'No, you don't, pardner!' And, of course, I did n't. He had climbed up out of the dark on t' other side of the engine and was working shares with Saddle

Jack at that time, you 'll note. Taking it all together, they and the gang made quite a rich get-away that night; took about all they could tote handy.

"Oh, yes! Yes, they got them, later, and cooped them for a while, and it was the breaking of the parole that they both got out on that 's now got this Saddle Jack what looks to be his sure finish. It ought to be a powerful lesson to Jim Lucero, who don't seem to be in this last happening, and keep him good till he dies; but with his mixture of native blood and the stories of white men's outrages against his people that 's been schooled into him by true-enough legends for three generations, you might say, it 's just as likely to start him off wrong again. But it 's hardly in him, at his years; not scarcely, I should think."

"Where 's he now?" asked McPeltrie, breaking the ensuing silence with something less of enthusiasm than that with which he had embarked upon the earlier discussion.

"Jim is living out yonder, about ten miles or such a matter, some back from the track, and appears to be a mighty amiable citizen, far as I can discover. Sheepman in a small way, I reckon," Enderby answered, in the conclusive manner of having followed the subject to its logical end.

"Well, Pap," persisted McPeltrie, "you 're a heap old and wise and I 'm meaning no disrespect, but it don't seem a whole job to me that way. Where was your able-bodied fireman and his artillery and the fire-hook and the hot water squirt-hose all the between-times, while the game was young? Who was your fireman, anyway?"

"If you 'll think that play over some careful, son, it will be made manifest to you that there was n't any between-time, to speak of. And the fireman was on his seat-box, same as me, with his hands kind of flabbed out in easy sight on his knees, except when we were helping the friends uncouple.

"Dodson, here, was my fireman that trip. Maybe he could make his doings some plainer to you, if there is spare time on your run with him to-day. But our play looked all square and regular to me then, and looking back from this distance, I can't rightly see that I 've got call to change them views of it."

"Well, gee-whillikens!" exclaimed McPeltrie, gazing in astonishment at the unperturbed face of Dodson, for whom he had been firing of late.

"I spoke my piece. I never lost any hold-up men, that I know of, and ain't looking for any!" said Dodson with his cool and convincing smile.

"Same here!" said McPeltrie with a valiant shake of the head. "But I 'd sure have to take one jab at them if the game came up on my deck. I just could n't help it, you see! I 'm built that way."

"I have n't noticed anything special in your build," laughed Dodson, "but I allow that you are built all right for firing, and here comes our job. Come on! So long, boys!"

They moved away from the group together, at that, and were presently heading the Overland away over the western crest with their fresh engine, quite in the usual order of things, and it seems hardly fair that McPeltrie should have been called upon so summarily by fate to make good his declarations. Yet, it is allowed to pass without quibble that all is fair in war and some other pursuits, and what followed was war, while it lasted.

The trip west to Balceta with the Overland was made without unusual happenings and Dodson and McPeltrie were well-nigh back to Villa Rica with the mail, in the small, dark hours of that night's return run. That is, they had reached and stopped at a naked little platform along the tracks in response to the conductor's cab signal, to drop a lone passenger into the darkness of the early morning. It was at the point which Enderby doubtless had in mind when roughly locating the neighborhood of Jim Lucero's small sheep range for McPeltrie's benefit in the previous morning's talk at the Villa Rica tank, and while McPeltrie had now come close to the location — was, in fact, very close to the subject earlier in hand — he was quite unmindful of either the one or the other, being busy hooking at a mass of clinker that had been caking his fire and menacing the schedule in the latter part of the run.

The blower was purring fiercely through the smoke-stack and broad bands of ruddy light were alternately dying and flaring upward upon the dense darkness above the engine as he faced the white heat from the open fire-box door and writhed his strong body and distorted his determined face in the glare of the fire. There had been only a hurried, struggling ten seconds of this, with Dodson, in deep concern, leaning down from his seat-box to glance into the roaring furnace glare, and then McPeltrie safely hooked the clinker up and was in the act of a last upward heave of the fire-hook to land the thing upon the engine deck and later kick it well into the ditch beside the track. His swiftly uplifting arm struck an unlooked-for obstruction, and turning his blinded eyes toward the darkness of the gangway he dimly outlined the figure of a man, whom he instantly assumed was the conductor, standing close in his way.

"Keep out of the way, will you?" he snapped, and turned his eyes back into the white glare without losing his precious hold upon the clinker.

The obstruction at his elbow did not move, however, and his suspended hand upon the heavy loop of the fire-hook failed to deliver the clinker upon the deck at his next effort. When he again turned his face fiercely with hand still in air, the obstruction spoke.

"Climb up beside your pardner! Drop the hook!" it said, and the game had really come up on McPeltrie's deck.

Contrary to the accepted order of such proceedings, McPeltrie straightened up and stiffened like a man of stone at sound of the strange voice, and his hold upon the hook-loop set like the grip of a vise. In a tense instant of silence his heat-blinded eyes cleared to frame the shadowy image of the intruder, and for the moment following he was not quite sure whether his mind was harking back to the recently spoken words of Pap Enderby or whether he was really looking upon a very exact counterpart of the encounter with Jim Lucero, which Enderby had tersely described.

There was the man with the gun levelled upon the small of Dodson's back and Dodson with his hands lying still and spread plainly upon his knees. Yes, and there was the mate to that gun, wavering close before his face like the liquid sweep of a coiled rattler's head, and he was staring straight into it! A fusillade of rifle shots back along the train rang out above the humming of the engine blower and broke the spell of the thing, all of which had grown upon McPeltrie's mind in the passing of a breath or two, and he unlimbered from his momentary palsy. It was real!

There are, fortunately, few men, outside the slums of cities and the uttermost haunts of savages, who will deliberately shoot down an unarmed man, even in the most desperate of ventures. Whether McPeltrie reckoned with a sure knowledge of this, or whether he merely acted up to his impulse with the heat from the furnace scorching the whole front of him, is of no present consequence. He struck a pivoting blow downward, swiftly and in silence, with the heavy loop of the fire-hook, and the slim, wiry body of the intruder crumpled down upon the deck with spreading hands from which the guns clattered loosely upon the lapsheet and slid off into the darkness below the gangway.

McPeltrie let go his grip upon the hook-handle that still projected from the fire-box and fell upon the man with the fury of a cougar. The shock of his weight and the closing of his grip upon the man's throat aroused the fallen highwayman to battle for his life as an animal instinctively must battle in a death grapple. It was all so swiftly past that when the struggling pair rolled out of the gangway and somersaulted to the soft embankment below, even the quick wits of Dodson had not had time to grasp fully the fact that he was free from the menace of the guns. And when he leaped from his box and sprang to the gangway the straining voice of McPeltrie came thickly up to him from below, mingled with the quick rattle of the rifles along the train.

"Pull 'em out, Dodson! I'll catch the hind end!" yelled McPeltrie. "I'm doing well! Hurry!"

That was all, and Dodson did it. With the fire-door open and McPeltrie's fire-hook protruding from the box, he opened sander and throttle and was quickly gone with the train. He patched the fire and trusted, the whiles, to luck ahead, over the five miles that brought the train to first touch with the telegraph, and then the affair was quickly in the hands of Bunnel, the despatcher, and Abe Hazard, marshal at Villa Rica.

But no McPeltrie came forward from the train when Dodson pulled up at the telegraph station. Therefore, Dodson made his first record of insubordination by refusing to take the train on to Villa Rica without McPeltrie. He fought the question rapidly and fiercely over the wire with the despatcher, insisting that he must have permission to cut the engine loose and run back. Waverly, the conductor, was of the same mind until the despatcher snapped out a brief and final order to proceed to Villa Rica regularly and run back an extra to the point where McPeltrie fell off. They signed for the order and went, when it thus came solidly back to the routine of written orders, Waverly voicing the unspoken fear of Dodson, by way of a poor consolation to himself.

"He 's dead by now, like as not," said he, "but we 'll get Abe and the boys aboard and go back for a hard try at finding him and that gang, anyway."

Their later arrival at the lonely platform showed little in the light of day to answer for the trouble of the dark hours, and the marshal and his men silently unloaded their rifles and horses from the hastily made up train and dispersed, circling about and beyond the track for the desired trail from the spot. Dodson picked up the blood-stained cap of McPeltrie from where it lay by the embankment and held it out mutely for Waverly's inspection. Then they could only climb aboard and return to Villa Rica, leaving Abe Hazard to work it out with his posse. Trains must run, even though men may die.

It was a sorry special caucus that was being held that afternoon at the roundhouse tank, and so much as the flutter of a vulture's wing above the rim-rock of the crater did not escape the anxious eyes that looked up from below, on watch for a sign of the return of Hazard's men. First to appear, however, was the lazy line of Camargo's ambling burro train returning from its journey of the day before and now winding its way down the ancient native trail upon the farther side of the rocky circle. Like animated bundles of fagots they looked, under their too heavy loads; all save one of them in the lead of the procession, and upon that one sat the huddled figure of a man by whose side old Camargo carefully picked his way upon the narrow footpath in the face of the cliff and steadied the rider upon his small mount.

When the little train had safely reached the green area in the crater bottom the chattering magpies rose laughing into the sunlight, as before, and the group at the tank bench, wearied with its long surmising, idly watched the approach until Dodson suddenly sprang to his feet and rushed away with long, leaping strides to meet Camargo and his passenger. The tank bench group trailed running in the rear and when they closed in upon the rider it was to see McPeltrie, whose battered and swollen face still bore the semblance of a victorious smile, lurch heavily from the back of the burro and slip, senseless, to the ground in the ready support of old Camargo's arms.

A different kind of cavalcade shortly came winding over the edge of the crater's rim and picked its way down the same tortuous trail. Abe Hazard led the march and at the middle of the little file of vigilant horsemen rode a swarthy, slim-bodied little man with bleached blue eyes and nervous hands, whose feet were bound securely under the belly of his horse and whose restless hands remained close-locked upon his saddle horn.

While that procession found its way to the *carcel* and presently distributed itself unassumingly about the town, but minus the little man with the faded eyes, the senseless body of McPeltrie was borne away to Villa Rica's modest railroad hospital, upon the big shoulders of Dodson, whereon McPeltrie's head lolled helplessly as the head of a sleeping child.

About twenty-four hours of inactivity was all that he could be held down to in the hospital ward, and then, when Dodson came in next day to sit with him on a special leave off, he swung his strong legs clear of the side of the cot, against the protests of the nurse and Dodson, and, sitting there, began the brief record of his adventure.

"I 'm all right," he protested. "Say, Dodson, talking about me and Samson and Balaam being some friendly, like you said before this play came up, was n't that a pretty hearty imitation of Samson you gave when you were trying to pull the throttle out by the roots, getting away from that place down there?

"Last glimpse I had of you through the window, while we were rolling to the bottom of the bank, you were hunched up like you were pulling down front porticos and expecting the roofs soon!

"And if me and Camargo are going to win with that Balaam play I put up yesterday coming home on his burro, I 'll have to be getting out of this sick-factory or I 'll lose my pull with Camargo! Give me my clothes, you fellows, will you?"

"Are you fit?" laughed Dodson, in spite of his deep concern, as McPeltrie ruefully fondled his blackened eye and swollen face.

"Sure I 'm fit! Let 's have them and we 'll go! I 'm not hurt much. The gang treated me fine — pretty near. You see, I thought I had that fellow safe outheld and just about choked helpless when I yelled to you to pull the train away from them. There was n't any reason that I could see why I could n't just give him another squeeze or two and then let go of him and hop on the hind end, or somewheres, when it came by. The little cuss was tough as nails, though, and he wiggled loose and gave me a short-arm clip in the eye that put me clear off to one side in the fuss, and then by the time I ought to been getting aboard, the rest of the gang rode up and began mauling me right sociable for a while. I did n't feel able to leave them, at the time.

"Sure, they wanted to rope me up and shoot me full of things, but that little cuss that came to see us on the engine seemed to be bossing the job and he would n't have it. I heard him tell them that he had no notches of that kind on his gun and did n't propose having any; they 'd likely get pretty near everything but money for this job anyway and he did n't mean to make it hanging, or something about like that.

"He 's game though, all right enough! They finished by chucking me up behind on a horse and rode away up to the edge of the scrub pine and throwed me off. 'Tell Abe Hazard and his gang to come and get us if they want us!' was what the little fellow said as they scattered and rode away. And that 's how old Camargo came to find me not much interested in things, when he came along with his wood train. He 's a good old cuss, after all, Camargo is, and I needed him a whole lot, about then."

"Well, Abe did," said Dodson quietly.

"Did what?" said McPeltrie.

"Wanted them," said Dodson. "And he went out and got them; leastways, one of them, and he's down in the *carcel* now, waiting to make your further acquaintance. Abe said I should ask you when you could come down and have a look at him to make sure. He's not expecting you to-day, though."

"Right now, I told you! Come on with them overalls and stuff, you fellows! I'm wanting out, I say!"

Out he went, with Dodson's help, and when, a little later, he sat facing the man in the *carcel,* his fingers wandered softly over the dark cushion about his eye and the nervous fingers of the prisoner performed a like tender office for his own closed optic, while, together, they regarded one another with that peculiar blend of respect and curiosity which sometimes marks the face of a too eager youngster who has just picked up a strange cat and, getting himself surprisingly clawed, has let it go again.

"Pardner," said McPeltrie softly, extending his hand toward the swarthy little man of the faded and damaged blue eyes, when the patience of Hazard, Dodson, Enderby, and the others had been strained almost to the point of discourteous questioning. "Pardner, you are sure in a no-account sort of business, but I'd like to shake hands with you. I'm harboring a whole heap of respect for a man of your size that can knock me out when I've got him down! Would you mind saying your name?" he concluded as their hands closed upon each other.

"Jim Lucero," said the little man, while a sickly grin struggled for a place among his disarranged features. "I reckon I ain't in that business you allude to, no more now, the way things is stacking up."

"Well, gee-whillikens!" exclaimed McPeltrie, slowly releasing Lucero's hand and staring questioningly at Enderby. The old man simply nodded.

"I'm not so mighty sure I'd do it again," McPeltrie confided to Enderby and Dodson when they had reached the open air, "but I had to have a jab at him, if I died. I just could n't help it. I was built that way."

"You sure were," admitted Dodson, without hesitation, but, as I said, when Pap, here, was talking the other day, I had n't noticed it, special, up to that time."

Enderby said nothing, although he again nodded wisely in general acquiescence, as they turned away.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VOICES

BELLAIR, roundhouse foreman at the east end of the middle prairie division, looking over the shoulder of the man at the work-book, remarked:

"That name of yours, Braintree, always makes me think of axle-grease and vinegar."

"Uh-huh," replied Braintree without looking up from his writing. "Depends some on what a fellow thinks with. When they first pulled down on that name-handle of yours, I reckon they did n't know whether they were going to ring or whistle!"

Malcolm Z. Braintree was the last speaker's name and no matter how long the trip or how weary he might be, when he turned his engine in at the end of the run and went to the roundhouse to put his work-report upon the book, he signed it in full; also, what he wrote in the report was always found to be correct, which is a somewhat unusual condition.

Harper, recently called back from Villa Rica, had just come out from Chicago to try out the speed and power of some new locomotives. He was now overhauling some shining instruments nearby and he turned to look searchingly at Braintree through the smoky twilight of the roundhouse.

He had left the motive power office a few minutes before, and his request for a good man to run the fast engines for test had brought from the superintendent of motive power one word: "Braintree."

Naturally, he was curious to see the man who would often hold the power of life and death over him, in the days just ahead, and he looked long and carefully at Braintree, while the engineer chatted some further nonsense, and talked gravely of some work, with the foreman.

The result of his study of Braintree seemed to please and also to puzzle him. This choice of an engineer meant a great deal to Harper, who was to ride upon the cylinders of the engine at high speed. Working in a flimsy little lookout-house and busy with his quick-acting instruments, he would have scant time to watch the track, and his safety would depend greatly upon the engineer.

Braintree's record of engine-running was long and good. His heavy head sat startlingly upon his tall wiry shape, and there was a set of the jaw and a smouldering glow of the eyes, deep-set in his sombre face, that hung disturbingly in Harper's mental impression of him. He was again keenly conscious of it when he met Braintree in the roundhouse next day, to prepare for the test run of the Sunflower Mail; but their relations were, from the beginning, so cordial and open that Harper forgot all else in the absorbing interest of locating his instruments upon the magnificent engine.

When the day was done, he was ready, with the toy-like apparatus, to record epics of speed and power greater than those which, in another age, were attributed only to the gods. But these flights were to reduce the poetry of Titanic action to the prosaic terms of time and money. Those, indeed, were the terms in which Harper was thinking, and likewise, they are the terms with which the mind of Braintree was supposed to be constantly engaged. But no book of rules has ever wholly controlled the workings of a man's mind and, doubtless, none ever will.

When the big racer backed through the high arch of the roundhouse door, next morning, and her wheels clucked aggressively across the turn-table, Braintree leaned from the cab window, smiling back proudly upon her handsome length, and tolerantly upon Harper and all of his works.

Harper's various devices and adjustments engaged his attention at the forward end of the foot-board, until the engine settled against the train couplings, at the station, and was attached to "The Sunflower," in all its glory.

Braintree came down from the cab for a final look below, and standing by the web-like centre of the forward driving-wheel, the top of whose tread he could just reach, he leaned there looking at the test apparatus, and finally at Harper's intent face above him. "I thought, when I first saw you, that you were one of us," he remarked, presently, "but I 'm not so sure."

"Yes," said Harper, abstractedly bending over his instruments. "Yes. Fine-looking engine, eh?"

"She will go some," replied Braintree, with a note of disappointment, and resumed his oiling.

Before he climbed back into the cab, he came around the pilot and, looking earnestly up to Harper, said: "Look out for yourself, after we get going. There will be a killing on the line to-day; but it may be none of ours."

"That 's cheerful! How do you know?" Harper asked, with sudden interest.

"I 'll be watching; but you keep looking too," said Braintree evasively, and went back to his place in the locomotive.

When they trailed away over the bluffs, that afternoon, chasing the declining sun, Kansas lay baking in the sluggish breath of a hot wind. The heat from the front end of the engine, the rays of the sun, and the blistering dust, cut into Harper's vitality deeply, and he felt little of the fierce joy of good going, until the engine's speed, steadily mounting, had created a seeming gale that drowned the strident sounds of the grasshoppers in the weedy embankments, and intoned the bubbling rhythm of her quick soft exhaust. Gnarled globes of the pretty green Osage apples were turning brown and sear in the miles of high hedges by the track, and in endless fields the tall beaded fronds of Kaffir-corn were purpling, here and there.

With the swift-rushing air pouring down and about him, he began to busy himself with cut-offs, pyrometer, and vacuum gauge, with speed records and indicator, and soon was living the life of the engine, fascinated by its well-nigh perfect work. When he had need to signal his assistant in the cab, or Braintree to change the pace, he found Braintree always watching.

The engine was now working swiftly and smoothly, and the long line of glistening coaches curled true in its shifting wake. And yet, he had a half-formed sense of something forgotten or misplaced. It pressed upon him constantly, and finally, in a lull of his activities, it came to him clearly. It was the whistle that had been pressing for notice. Why? He did not know; was only aware of having heard it, once or twice, in a remote way, since they started.

But now, he straightened until his face came above the top level of the wind shelter in which he rode, and looked ahead down the track that was rushing dizzily under him in a haze of mottled gray and brown. He looked intently from the careening box, until a whistling-post pushed up its face of white and black on the seared bank far ahead, and seemed to come gliding toward him. Then he looked back at Braintree in the cab and noted that the engineer was looking straight down the line ahead.

When the engine had thrust swiftly beneath her half the distance to the whistling-post, Braintree's hand went slowly up to the whistle-rod above his head. He grasped it and, turning, stood for an instant looking far out across the rolling country. Then he drew down until the whistle answered.

The first two long blasts of the familiar crossing-signal moaned forth in regular order and were regularly followed by one of two short blasts required. But the last short blast did not sound in its period, and Braintree's hand hung heavy upon the rod.

His head was bowed low, his chin upon his breast, and his attitude that of intent listening. Harper caught a glimpse of his assistant's face, up behind Braintree in the rolling and rushing cab, looking in startled wonder at the engineer's bowed head. Then, just as the engine shot by the whistling-post, exactly at the moment of passing, the last short call from the whistle boomed forth, sudden and sharp as the bursting of a bomb, and Braintree, with a smile, resumed his seat at the window.

Harper crowded his fluttering cap closer upon his head, and looked questioningly at Braintree, but with no answering smile. It had sounded, at the last, uncomfortably like an emergency stop signal.

"That 's it," he muttered, turning again to his work in the swirl of twisting winds that fought about him and tried to wrest each fluttering slip of paper from his steady fingers. "It is that hanging off on the last pull of the whistle that has been bothering me. Just because it was out of the ordinary, I suppose. Don't like it."

But, dashing down the long straight lead just then, into the wooded hollow in which they crossed the Little Gopher Creek, came a burst of speed that gave the conditions he was working for, and in the absorption of recording results, he forgot his first impulse to go back along the run-board and learn more about the whistle performance. Climbing the opposing heavy grade beyond the creek, and again dashing down into the hollow in which ran the Big Gopher, gave him further hurried opportunities, and when they rounded the great curve through close-standing woods near Song, at a pace that drove the air stranglingly into Harper's lungs, and puffed his cheeks and stung his eyes, his work, for the trip, was done.

He was standing at the front of his airy shelter on the cylinder, with arms folded upon its front wall, elated by this first performance and laughing in his heart for very glee of life and motion in the fleeting world that spun widely around at either side and constantly closed in at the rear of them.

They were running into the eye of the setting sun and as they ran from timber to open, far to the south a wood-dove came homing rapidly, at right-angles to the track. Its graceful flight caught Harper's eye and held him spellbound with the strange contest of speed, when it became apparent that the bird was veering steadily, to cross low before the flying train.

The quick, folding movement of the bird's wings carried it nearer with surprising speed and the angle between its course and that of the engine narrowed until Harper half lost the reality of his surroundings, feeling himself an atom being hurled to meet that other atom in mid-air, until he could have cried out in warning to the bird. Like a dart, at the last, it made its final effort. The angle closed its acute point upon the front of Harper's wooden shelter. The dusty little traveller failed, by a hand's breadth, to pass, and struck with a crashing thud and a puff of alkali dust, just out of reach of Harper's outstretched hand. It rebounded without a struggle, into the ditch, motionless.

The little tragedy suddenly let down the ecstasy of Harper's wild pleasure, and dismounting his instruments he made his way back along the reeling foot-board and into the cab, with a sobered face. The instant snuffing out of the vital spark is appalling in any guise.

Braintree closed the cab door after him and silently made room for him upon the seat-cushion. But, when they had glided into the division point, a few minutes later, and the engine had come to a halt, he glanced back along the rapidly emptying coaches, and turning to Harper said gravely: "That was it."

And, somehow, Harper understood.

"It was the killing," said Braintree later in the evening, when they sat in the sultry gloom before their little hotel.

"How did you know, this morning?" Harper slowly asked.

"The Voices," came the quiet but disturbing reply.

"Eh?" said Harper.

"Know what lies under that spot where the dove struck the ditch? No, nor anybody else but Old Man Lawrence, the wreck foreman, and he is not telling much. But he has many a queer cache along the line.

"That 's where the mails came together, five years ago. Full speed on the big curve. Could n't see each other, until the west-bound cleared the woods; same train as we were to-day. The operator at Song forgot, likely, to turn the board on the east-bound, until the engine had gone by. He always said he turned it red, but when you see Billy Angel wheeling himself around, with no legs to speak of, if you can get him to talk, he will tell you that the board was white, for clear, when he shot by, running the engine on the mail east.

"Billy is the only one that is left to tell it. Twelve others, of the train and engine crews, all went, and a lot of the passengers. They buried by the tracks most of the rubbish that did n't burn. You could n't expect Old Lawrence would sort small pieces in clearing up a double mail wreck, with the main line blocked — he dare n't."

"And the voices?" hazarded Harper.

A curdling cry, from a burr-oak across the way, shivered the humid air in answer, and brought the legs of Braintree's chair to the pavement, with a thud.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, rising.

When the velvet fluff of wings through the intense darkness announced the creature's flight, he resumed his seat with a disquieted air and slowly fanned himself with his hat.

"That 's no good to anybody, that kind of bird, and you can look for trouble — if we hear from the boys.

"I knew all of those boys; grew up with some of them, and they belonged to our Society for Research. Not a day in the cab, since that wreck at Song, and not a meeting of the society, but that they have come and talked to me.

"When there is trouble coming I 'll be sure to know it in time. But you keep a-looking, like I told you to-day."

In the gloom and the ensuing silence the situation, to Harper's mind, took on sinister proportions. Might the voices some time tell Braintree to start without orders, as well as to stop? He decided to make some inquiries when they got back to the other division end. In the broad sunlight of the next morning, with Braintree jovial and happy and the air cleared and alive with a cool draft from the far Colorado snow-caps, the thing looked different, and Harper thought better of his decision.

That day the engine was turned back on a freight drag, to test her heaviest workings, and the next day they went out for the final fast run on the Sunflower Mail. It came a gem of a day, with Kansas smiling thankfulness for the previous night's drenching rain. It was the day of days for many Kansans, and one of the yearly red-letter days for the railroad. The Grange was sending its happy and prosperous thousands over the line, to the annual picnic among the big oaks near Song.

The Sunflower Mail, for convenient handling of the crowds, was being run in three sections. The bands of the first section, just arrived, were blaring in happy rivalry, and the twelve coaches were gay with streamers and laughing faces, crowding from the windows and forward platforms. Braintree and his fireman, with Harper and his assistant aboard, crossed the turn-table and drew down past the cheering train-load, to the station, to be ready to take out the second section, when it came in as the regular mail train. To follow them, therefore, was coming the third section of "The Sunflower," loaded, like the first section, with happy and excited people.

Presently, the long line of loaded coaches in the first section began slipping quietly past the test engine, and each coach-load cheered gayly to the crew on Braintree's strange-looking engine. They waved a laughing farewell, as the last coach drew by, and the lone flagman on the rear platform smiled and waved in sympathy. The floating strains of the bands grew fainter and fainter and at last were lost in the rolling din that drifted back from their engine, on the rising breeze.

The real mail ran a few minutes late to where Braintree got it, and they left town hurriedly with it. The semaphore arms of the block-signal system fell regularly, far ahead of them, showing that the excursion section was keeping well out of the way. Braintree was at his best and Harper was exultantly absorbed in the closure of the important series of tests, when they were again running breathlessly toward the whistling-post, east of the crossing and the woods at Song.

The peculiar whistle-signalling by Braintree had in the several days past so fixed itself in Harper's mind that, unconsciously, he had come to listen for the last short blast in its unusual sequence.

While he was hastily taking off some high-speed diagrams and consulting his gauges, the first notes of the crossing-signal boomed out, and just as he set his senses to wait for the pause before the last, the brake-shoes clapped down upon the truck and driving wheels with a crash, and the sharp discharge of an emergency application from the engineer's brake-valve was wafted to him on the swift wind that was then blowing in the direction they were running. But no final note sounded from the whistle.

The wheels were savagely grinding sand upon the rails, but turning swiftly forward. A glance at Braintree's straining eyes, staring ahead onto the apparently empty curve, sent Harper climbing over the hand-rail and up the narrow step on the side of the boiler, to flatten himself low behind the sand-dome, on top of the rolling, slippery boiler-jacket.

As he crouched there, he saw the top of the smoke-stack disappear into the crumpling and ripping hood of a passenger coach. Then, with a jumble of splinters and canvas roofing, which sat for a moment upon it like a burlesque crown, it turned bottom-end upward and slid heavily down the side of the smoke-arch and crunched through the bottom of his wind shelter, to the engine cylinder.

A chorus of shrieks from within the car greeted the grinding impact with the train, which Harper had not yet clearly seen, and the hot up-ended smoke-stack was sending up curling wisps of smoke from the spot he had occupied a few moments before. But they were stopped.

When he arose and looked ahead, he saw the battered rear end of "The Sunflower's" first section thrust a few feet ahead of them by the shock, but no blood spilled to mar its gala day. Braintree was sitting, gray-faced and silent, upon his cushion.

An eighth of a mile back, their flagman found the flagman who had been sent back against them when it was found necessary to re-enter the block-section, after once clearing it. He lay face down in the high grass beyond the ditch, unconscious, from some human ill, tightly clutching the red flag which was all but hidden beneath him.

Harper never would talk much of that experience, and perhaps he was wise therein. But, before he left for headquarters with his data, he said to Braintree: "Could you have caught a glimpse of the corner of that flag in the grass, Malcolm, and not have realized it at the time?"

"The flag was down; hidden; a hundred yards beyond the post. I braked at the post," was all that Braintree answered.

CHAPTER IX

HARPER'S ROUGH NIGHT

"HARPER, you better get on Number 15 to-night and go out to the mountains. Take hold of an A-45-class engine and find out what is in these reports of no steam, won't go anywhere, and hard handling.

"I have my own opinion, but I want some test runs made, and a straight-out report of what the engines will do and how much coal and water it takes to do it."

That was the simple beginning of it, about nine o'clock one night in Chicago, and as there was nothing very unusual in such unheralded starting upon the work he had been doing at times, Harper made his brief adieux, climbed aboard the Overland Express about ten o'clock, and shortly thereafter was comfortably asleep in his berth.

Throughout the greater part of the night he slept on, to the regular rataplan of the hurrying wheels across the wide plains, and once just before the myriad stars gave up their watching above the great, silent expanses which were steadily lifting toward the distant mountains, he aroused and looked sleepily for a moment upon the swiftly circling shadows beyond his window and slept again, with no intimation that he was fairly launched upon the way of one of his most stirring experiences.

In the afternoon of the following day, he was in the Villa Rica yards making the well-meaning mistake, as he was shortly to learn, of weighing onto the tender of a picked engine four tons of coal, and no more, in order to discourage its too free use upon the run for which he was preparing, and the work of which he believed he had carefully estimated.

"Pardner," volunteered the yardmaster, who had been watching the preparations in a not unfriendly way, "if you haul five hundred tons out of this hole, single, and drop it down to Balceta, with one of these big engines, they 'll kill you!"

"Not handling so hard as all that, I hope," said Harper, smiling down upon him from his perch upon the collar of the tender.

"I 'm not meaning the engines!" replied the yardmaster, very soberly, as he turned to walk away.

The sinister import of the calm and positive statement prompted the question that rose to Harper's lips.

"Nothing of that sort here, is there? I have seen no sign of it."

"There 's only a few of them strayed in. But, keep that in your mind, if you are bent on pulling a record load," said the man upon the ground, looking steadily up into Harper's eyes.

"I will; and much obliged, then," responded Harper. "But, you can tell that kind, if you like, that if I go off this division before I finish what I came for, I will go straight up; not over the mountain!" Which quiet and earnest reply was about the nearest approach that Harper was ever known to make toward boasting.

Villa Rica, rather far out in the rim of railroad doings, was sometimes hard put to it for men. It was not always possible to discriminate as closely as might have been desirable, and therefore, Villa Rica sometimes drew a blank, or worse, when notable gaps in a man's papers had to be overlooked or winked at, for the sake of filling a needy roundhouse board.

" Well, I believe you," replied the yardmaster, after looking Harper over quite carefully, " and I hope you will make out all right and get things going again, so we stand a show to keep this yard cleared out.

" But that 's not saying that you are not taking some chances by jumping in here just now, and I 'm telling you the more so, because my shirt is well stiffened on my back, right now, with blood that was fetched by a chunk that somebody drove into me from the roundhouse door, just before daylight this morning; and no time, yet, to attend to it.

" Back up, there ! " he suddenly shouted in conclusion, and his arms went flailing aloft and about, like the arms of a disturbed windmill, as the switch engine came scurrying down through the yards, unheeding his first silent signal.

As if to emphasize the yardmaster's warning, great banks of sullen-looking clouds began pushing their keen gray edges higher and higher above the western rim of the great crater of Villa Rica, like gaunt wolves baring their fangs at sight of a sure quarry, as Harper sat looking admiringly after the gritty veteran of the yards, whose nerve remained unshaken by so small a thing as the well-aimed missile of an assassin safely hidden by the night.

When, in the first darkness of evening, Harper made his way down through the yards to where the engine stood coupled to its short and heavy train of dead freight, the sky was flaming with a silent, pulsing glare of lightnings' blazes, which, one moment, set the vast depression in the mountains glowing vivid and red, and in the next left it steeped in dense blackness, lighted at longer intervals by blinding zigzags of flame too distant to make a sound in the nearer gulches.

An engineer, whom Harper had never before seen, stood beside the engine, in sullen, arrogant pose, his fringed buckskin gauntlets clutching his hips with a wide spread of the elbows, looking in silent disdain at the new machine. The flame of his torch burned steadily upward where he had set it upon the guides, in the still, surcharged air, and a single look into his sneering face and half-concealed eyes informed Harper that he had met the hostile mood of a man as threatening as the veiled flashing of the lurking storm; which impression was not long lacking confirmation.

With a word of greeting, Harper handed to him a pass which served as ready credentials at such times, and with a scornful glance at it, the man returned it, saying nothing, as he turned his back squarely and ambled a step or two toward the pilot.

"Say!" he blurted, suddenly wheeling to face Harper. "You 're one of these here damned experts, I understand. Here 's brakes on this engine truck, with a key gone out of that back break-head! Supposin' that shoe drops out! Have to cut 'em out, would n't we? Huh? How 'd we cut 'em out, eh?"

Hostility breeds hostility and resentment begets its like, in human nature, and Harper was not superhuman, even though he was not devoid of a fair measure of tolerance.

The man's manner plainly said that he well knew the answers to his questions and quite as plainly said that he believed Harper did not know; which promptly determined Harper to carry on the rude burlesque, as being the surest way to a lasting understanding with a man who, he believed, was for some reason yielding to the worst that was in him and submerging his best.

Therefore, he walked over to the engine and indicating the train-line valve, said: "Maybe we could open that up some, could n't we?"

"Yes! That 's so! Did n't notice that!" said the engineer, with well-feigned satisfaction. "But, no; I don't know, either, come to think. Guess that 's only the train-line cock, ain't it?"

"Maybe it is," said Harper, with a poor imitation of uncertainty.

"Yes, it 's the train-line cock," said the man. "Well, n'em mind. I just don't see the triple, but we could cut 'em out with an axe, mebbe, if we had to. We 'll get through somehow!"

With which wise and friendly conclusion he picked up his torch and climbed aboard, leaving Harper standing below, in the shifting glare and gloom of the hovering storm.

"Say!" his voice quickly rang out again, as his angry face appeared at the cab window. "Come up here a minute, young fellow, if you ain't too busy! I don't mind pulling all the freight in this yard, but I 'd like to learn how, before I go!"

When Harper, now somewhat eager for the further development of the man's crude horseplay, promptly sprang for the step and mounted the cab, the engineer was looking knowingly across to his grinning fireman and singing stridently, "O Johnny-git-your-gun, there 's a dude-in-the-garden!" which he broke off abruptly, to launch at once upon a further quest for information.

"Say! I ain't no educated man, nor no expert, and I 'd like to know what that thing 's for," pointing meanwhile to the signal diaphragm, with which the engine was fitted for occasional passenger runs.

"That," said Harper, "is the —"

"Oh, well! Ne'm mind!" interrupted the other. "I say we 'll get through, some way, before the night 's over," and slipping down from his seat-box to the deck, beside Harper, he slid out of his coat and tossed it upon the seat-box. Reaching back to his hip pocket, he dragged out a heavy revolver and presented it suddenly, swaying it rapidly back and forth under Harper's nose, as the gun lay upon his open palm.

"See that, pardner?" he demanded with narrowing eyes. "I 'm never without that now. I just lost out, over in the Panhandle, before I come here, on a head-ender deal that was n't no fault of mine. But the next man that goes up against me, wrong, gets it right where he lives!"

"I see," said Harper. With which the engineer turned and stabbed the gun, muzzle down, into his opened seat-box, with a move like the driving home of a dirk.

"Climb up over there and make yourself at home, being 's you 're going with us," he advised, while savagely girding on his overalls. And to the fireman:

"Grinning don't crack no coal, Bo! You better get a grind onto your fire, for that 'shack' at the far end has been swinging a high-ball, continuous, for the last half-minute, and we 're a-going now!"

"Fire 's all right, *hombre*," retorted the fireman, whose face suddenly assumed an expression of resentment and hatred, quite as bitter as that of the engineer.

In a moment more, the engineer was upon his seat-box, with the lithe movement of a mountain cat. He thrust his head and shoulders far out of the cab window, in a backward glance along the train, and smiled a wide and bitter smile that set his full white teeth gleaming in the light of the flaming sky, as he turned and opened the throttle with a strong and skilful grasp.

From the throttle lever, his hand swung automatically to the dangling whistle-rod and as the slack ran slowly out of the train two quick, fierce blasts from the whistle cut the threatening silence of the great crater and announced the start up the long grade.

And, at the rear end, just when the marker-lights of the caboose lurched easily forward and joined in the onward movement of the train, the big bulk of the train-master loomed out of the darkness, during a lull of the lightning's play, and swung aboard, in accord with orders he had previously received, to make the trip on the test train.

Stung by the insolent ring of the demand which the engineer had made upon him at starting, the fireman charged coal into the fire-box at a rate that boded ill for Harper's reckoning, but Harper, in the quick satisfaction of hearing the resulting discharge of steam from the safety valve, even while the engine was working its hardest up the grade, said nothing to stay the extravagant work.

"Good steamer!" he mentally noted, and offered no objection to the merciless beating which the engine was receiving from the engineer.

They climbed the steep grade in less than schedule time, which fact prompted Harper's further mental comment: "Good goer!"

When they started down the first favoring grade beyond the rim of the Villa Rica crater, Harper's eyes were fixed steadily upon the figure of the engineer, now dimly outlined in the cab lights and again clear-cut and looming blackly against the framed square of fiery sky which the cab window intermittently showed.

Harper's observation was not long unrewarded. The man's foot shot out and fixed itself firmly against the boiler-head, as he reached for the reverse lever. When he guardedly unlatched and dropped the lever down a few notches in the quadrant, for the drift down the grade, in spite of the curved, springing arc of his powerful, bent arm, his strong body was set quivering and shaking by the quick struggling of the lever, much as a strong oak shivers above the last deadly strokes of the woodsman's axe. Only the man's great strength and skill kept the lever within his grasp until he latched it again where he wanted it.

"True bill!" was Harper's silent note. "Hard handling, sure enough."

While they ran the distance to the flat at the bottom of a short sag ahead, he went over the design of the gear, point by point, as he remembered it, and considered his later recommendation of the remedy. And at the bottom of the grade came the thing he was expecting. Had he not been expectant and ready, there would probably have been little of this tale to tell, except the story of a man thrown, battered and bleeding, through the cab door, to the run-board, or the embankment whirling along below.

"Say!" the engineer called, commandingly, with a beckoning, backward jerk of the head.

Harper pivoted around on the seat-box and sprang across the deck, from step to step, as the engineer swung his leg clear of the lever and faced toward him.

"Where would you set that lever for a run across the flat, at this speed? Let 's see you hook her up, will you?" was the greeting that met him, accompanied by a crafty side-glance.

Without a moment's hesitation, Harper seated himself upon the forward edge of the seat-box and bracing for the struggle which he knew would instantly follow, unhooked the lever and transferred its deadly menace from the quadrant latch to his own lithe arms and curving back.

Twice, he drew his full strength upon the threshing, quivering bar and twice it pulled him from the seat-box and jammed him back again upon it. The engine cab, with its dim lights and fixtures, seemed shaken into a dancing, garbled mass before his straining eyes, and the lightning-riven darkness in the valley ahead of the engine appeared to be scintillating with brilliant points of white light, which were not of the storm's making, in the following moments of uncertainty, while the struggle with the freed lever continued.

With a final backward lunge, born of shame, anger, and determination, he overbalanced the lever in the springing poise in which he had with difficulty held it, and then felt the welcome snap of the latch, as it settled home in one of the upper notches of the quadrant.

"About there!" he said, with shortened breath, and stepped back to the fireman's box a shade less nimbly than he came from it.

For an hour, they labored heavily or sped swiftly over the ridges and sags of the foothills that lie between Villa Rica and the Sacromonte country, with the coming storm settling more threateningly toward them and the coal pile melting rapidly away before the fireman's angry onslaught.

At the little telegraph station in the lonely valley of the Sacromonte, a red light turned above the dismounted box-car body, which then served as office, home, and castle for its solitary operator, stopped them with an order to increase the train to full rating for that part of the division, by taking on a string of empty stock cars from the Sacromonte siding; also, not to exceed six miles an hour over Bridge Eighty-nine, a half-hour's run ahead.

In silence, the additional burden was taken on, and, with no word spoken, the train was started with a sudden lurch that broke it in two at the middle.

Again coupled, it was again broken by the same method, and the engineer sat in sullen silence while the coupling was made and the air was pumped up.

Just when the engineer's hand shot out and settled in a close grip of the throttle lever, and all was ready for a third start and, probably, a third fiasco, the train-master's big, angular face loomed up in the gangway of the engine.

"Wait a second, since you are stopped!" said he quietly, and the engineer's hand dropped listlessly from the lever.

"Don't you think you have played horse long enough, for once? You bet, you have!" pursued the train-master, in fierce, low tones of repressed anger. "Now, I want you to pull this train out of here in one piece, or get off the engine, right now! Understand?"

The lightning was writhing and gleaming around the high, white head of Sacromonte and thunder tones were beginning to boom sullenly among the distant crags. But the lurid lights of the mountain-top were not more deadly in their menace than the look of sudden hatred which flashed into the engineer's face, at the sound of the train-master's ultimatum.

His hand moved stealthily down toward the seat-box, as he shifted his weight from the lid, and Harper, with quick remembrance of the night's ominous beginning at Villa Rica, crouched and tightened his trained muscles for a leap across the cab.

But an inclination to temporize seemed to overmaster the engineer's first impulse and he straightened up upon his seat-box, without relaxing his fixed stare into the train-master's eyes.

" I can pull them, if any man you 've got can," he gritted through his clenched teeth. " But you know as well as I do, that the couplings are rotten weak for this load!"

" I know the couplings! I know the load! I know the engine! And I know that you can pull them. *Pull* them!" replied the train-master, tensely.

With that terse admonition, he stood for a moment, the big loop of his strong lower jaw jutting out like a crag in the half-light of the cab, while he looked straight and closely into the engineer's eyes. Then he backed slowly to the gangway, dropped heavily down the steps, and disappeared into the darkness below the engine.

At the next attempt, the engine pulled them " in one piece," but at a rate and in a way that made it clear to Harper that he might as well begin heaving coal from the first car back of the tender then as later on, if he wanted to escape the shame of having laid out the road by weighing on a short allowance of coal at the start.

When he had put across the lurching gap between car and tender the required amount of coal and heaved it again, down into the hopper, he resumed his place in the engine as it went drumming swiftly over Bridge Eighty-nine, regardless of the " slow order," and down toward the mouth of the gorge of El Soledad, in which they were to meet and pass the night express.

The fury of the man at the throttle had apparently increased with the growing of the storm, which was now muttering and circling more closely down toward them.

"Say!" he called, as Harper's feet landed upon the deck. "Did you know that fellow was riding this train?"

"No," replied Harper. "I did not."

"Well it's a good thing for him that I didn't have a hundred dollars in my pocket, when he made that break about getting off!" shouted the engineer, keying his voice above the increasing uproar of the elements and the medley of noises from the swift-moving engine. "If I had, he'd a-gone off this engine with a busted crown-sheet! You can bet on that, pardner!

"Say! You give me a hundred dollars," he continued wildly, "and I'll turn her loose to hell down this grade, wildcat; and you stand the same chance I do for a hop-off! Give me ten dollars, and I'll do it!" he shouted, with increasing fury, as Harper, stepping closer, gazed steadily at him and made no reply.

And then, in the sheer madness of passion, he struck the brake-valve handle to a full release with a single sweep of his hand, sprung the throttle open a notch or two, and bent forward over the reverse lever, fixed in the habit of hooking up for greater speed, however uselessly then.

Then the tempest, deliberate in its gathering through the progress of the night, grew suddenly to its final fury along the mountain-crests, and swept, thundering and bellowing, down upon them, darting vivid tongues of flame from its swirling deluge of waters. And out of the lower depths of the gorge of El Soledad, where the express was laboring on heavily to meet them, came other rending blasts, as yet untouched by rain.

Fiercer winds came shrieking down from the ragged peaks and added their fury to the fury of the pass, while the air snapped and crackled with its surcharge of electricity, and within the engine the man's passion seethed, likewise, to its height.

With one swift movement, Harper reset the brakes, and was leaning to lay a close clasp upon the engineer's arms, when the fierce, rasping sound of steam escaping from the safety valve added itself to the din of sounds, and, unknown to its intent riders, the big engine was set tingling and alive with a static charge of electric fluid, from the heavily charged air.

Just for an instant, the engineer's cheek touched the side of the swinging whistle-rod, as he clutched the reverse lever and tried to evade Harper's extended hands, but in that instant he received a stinging static shock, which, for the moment, robbed his arms of their ultimate strength.

In the draft of a breath, the lever was torn from his clutching, loosened fingers and swept down, like a flash of light, deeper toward the corner; then, back, as swiftly. It struck him, full below the heart, before it flashed, ripping and clattering, down over the teeth of the quadrant again, and relatched itself in the corner.

He fell back from the numbing blow, into Harper's outstretched arms; speechless, breathless, the whites of his upturned eyes ghastly in the glare of the incessant lightning, as Harper lowered him quickly to the deck, with the help of the awed fireman, and reached up to close the throttle.

Springing to the deserted seat-box, Harper tightened his first quick hold of the brakes and fought the train down again to a speed which presently brought it safely to a stop above the red board of El Soledad. With barely the regulation ten minutes to clear, they were in the siding, with the switch closed, when the night express came roaring up over the flat in the gorge, with no evident intention of stopping.

When the red board failed to turn, at the repeated challenge of the whistle, however, the express stopped in the wild smother of the storm in the gulch, and shortly the downfallen engineer was being borne upon one of its litters, from the freight engine to the baggage car, while the swirling rain beat a hollow, irregular tattoo upon the tarpaulin which covered his motionless form, and the flaming lightnings waned, like the spent passion of the man.

"Say!" he gasped faintly, extending his hand to Harper, who bent above him in the car, as the train was about to take up its interrupted run eastward, and toward the little hospital at Villa Rica. "My name 's — Wiggins. You 're — all right.— Nothing pers'nal. When a fellow — loses out — Raw deal — You know — Bad — bad.

"G'bye, pardner — you 're all — right," he repeated weakly, as the train responded slowly to the first resounding exhaust from the express engine far ahead.

"Good-bye, brother," said Harper, with a friendly grip of the extended hand. "Don't fret! I 'll see you at the hospital, in a day or so."

Which he did, backing his belief in the final supremacy of the better side of the man's nature, which showed so strongly at the last; and in that way, supporting his opinion with a large measure of his good-will and a fair measure of his ready money, he set the engineer, in due time, upon his way, with hope renewed of a new job and a cleaner record.

All of which lies back of the written record of the letter-file in which reposes the commonplace report which Harper sent east, next morning after the storm, when the train had been safely worked down into Balceta yards.

" There appears to be some opposition, on account of heavier rating," he wrote, " but that will spend itself, shortly, I believe.

" There is no lack of steam; no lack of good going; and fuel consumption can be made quite satisfactory. An extra rough night has left that point to be proven, however, and shall report later upon it.

" The charge of hard handling is well founded. The link-radius being short, and steam pressure high, etc., etc., . . .

" I would recommend . . ."

Harper's further recommendations, however, are not now important.

CHAPTER X

THE PRODIGAL SON

FOLLOWING closely upon Harper's experience with Wiggins, the embittered engineer, there came a day in which arose opportunity much greater than it then appeared. Out of kindliness that knew no other motive, he that day cast a bit of figurative bread upon the waters which was to return to him after many days to feed his worthy ambition most satisfyingly.

Looking back from the engine, along the inner curve of a test freight train which Dodson was dragging slowly up the grades of El Soledad Canyon toward Villa Rica, a thrill of pity and surprise ran through Harper at what he saw. The flap of a ragged coat fluttered from the truss rods under the middle of a car well back in the train and below the tattered fringe dangled an arm and hand, trailing among the loose stone ballast.

" Have a look from this side, will you, Dodson? " Harper called across the cab when he had definitely made out the trailing hand. " Looks like somebody dragging back there. Better stop, would n't we? "

" Can't stop here, pardner," replied Dodson very positively as he stepped hastily across, " unless you want to lose the trip and double the mountain. Never start them again on this grade."

" Well, that is certainly the last word in truss-riding! "

exclaimed Harper as Dodson leaned over his shoulder and looked.

A small lump of sandstone shot out from under the car and went hurtling into the depths of the canyon while the idly dragging hand began a leisurely grasping for another piece of ballast.

"Nothing the matter with that fellow!" laughed Dodson when he had resumed his seat. "We will take him out of that when we stop at the crest."

The reckless young wayfarer was taken out of his perilous position, and none too gently, when the halt was made just before descending into Villa Rica. Somewhat arrogant, somewhat repellent, refusing even so much as to give his name, he resented their interference, even to the point where only Harper's good offices stood between him and rougher handling by the train crew.

It was Harper's insight that discerned the inherently fine moulding of the young man's mind and also Harper's money and advice, which, later that day, divested him of some of his rags and started him upon the way to better seeing and to his home.

Meanwhile, by night or by day as the need might be, far eastward, in a crowded Chicago freight yard, one Mack Albry, a switchman, labored valiantly. He was tough as roots, when there was a choked yardful of freight to shift, but he was not bad at heart. Everybody in the Twelfth Street yard knew that, and the yardmaster had learned just how loudly and how bitterly to curse him in order to get the most out of that knobbled red head without drawing down upon himself a fusillade of rock ballast or stray coupling-pins.

For a yardmaster, he had forgiven much of Mack's doing, because Albry was a first-class switchman, a usefully bad man in a rough-and-tumble, and a laughing, improvident friend or a deadly foe to the truck and truss riders who drifted in nightly from the west. He would feed them from his dinner-pail, or fight them to a quick finish the minute they struck the ground, just according to the disposition and the need they showed.

Nobody seemed to know or care where he came from in the beginning, but he had grown from a little freckled, eager-eyed roustabout, among the lodging-houses under the Twelfth Street viaduct, playing in the railroad yards, kicked out of the way and coming back smiling, until, from being allowed to throw the lever of a switch occasionally under careful watching, he had come to be the most daring car-flipper and rider-in of the daring crew that mauled freight cars in days when the endless gorge of them drove yardmasters wild at the viaduct. At last, just settling fairly into his young manhood, he had been regularly employed, and from then until the great change fell suddenly upon him he never wavered in his pride of the right to say incidentally: "Us switchmen, down at the viaduct."

Thus proudly established, he was busy in the yards one night in early winter, following Harper's meeting with the young wanderer far out in the mountains. All went well with Albry in this night's hurry and hazard, until Manning, on the yard engine, kicked a Denver and Rio Grande box car back so hard in response to Albry's whirling lamp signal that when it shot into Track Ten, with Mack clinging to the hand and step irons, and struck a rotten little flat car, the flat bowed up in the middle until its recoil sent him sprawling from his hold upon the box car and flattened his lantern out under his rugged body upon the ground.

When the noise of the crash had subsided, a quavering moan came from the direction of the box car, and as Mack leaped up and ran toward where the two cars had settled into the line, the moan arose to a despairing cry and some one pounded faintly within the box car.

"He 's mine!" yelled Mack, fierce with the shame of his fall, as the rest of the crew scurried between flying cuts of cars and ran up with lights. "He 's mine! I can lick any hoboe that ever rode a truck, or any of you, or the man that kicked that car in, nuther!"

But when the circle of light fell upon the death-like mask of a young face, with its hungry, sunken eyes that looked out of the now open car door, Mack's knotty fists uncurled and the group stood silently looking in pity. Then Summer, the special officer, joined the gathering, and reaching without ceremony for the starveling, grasped him by the collar. One first rough pull drew a groan from the sick man, but Summer was relentless.

"Come on!" he commanded.

"You don't!" declared Mack, suddenly confronting him.

"I do!" returned Summer, and drew a short and savage mace.

"This once, you don't! He 's mine! He 's a decent lad," contended Mack, and before Summer's upraised mace could descend upon him, he struck a stunning blow that sent Summer reeling across the track and into the farther darkness.

"Get on my back, boy," said Mack, and leaning over he loaded the frail body like a sack of meal and carried him away among the low red and green target lights, out from among the battling switch engines and across the yard, into the switch shanty.

"N'em mind," Mack replied to the night watchman's protest, and laid his burden upon the plank seat behind the stove. "N'em mind, you. He 's me friend."

"Where you been, pard?" he asked gently of the sick man. "Can you eat? Here, take some coffee. That 's it! That 'll put the business into you ag'in. Take some more. That 's right. Lay down. Don't you git waltzin' around in here. Ain't room enough for a dance. Drink some more; this here 's on me, you know." And thus he cajoled and bullied the fainting stripling into eating; not heavily, but constantly for a little while, and quieted his whimpering and made him forget his weak tears.

"Where you been?" repeated Mack, finally.

"*Been?* Oh, my God!" wailed the boy. "I 've been in the gutter. El Paso, Butte, Spokane, Denver; I know them all and they know me; but nothing good. Look at me! *Me!* Rags, filth, within and without. Sick; the lowest of the low," he rambled on.

"Where you goin'?" said practical Mack.

"Here," said the boy rousing. "Here. I was born in Chicago, but I did n't know enough to stay here. Got a telephone there?"

"Yes," said Mack.

"Call them, will you? Call them, quick. I 've got enough of it," said the stray, and glancing at the little group that had gathered in, he motioned Mack to come closer, drew his head down and said something that brought Mack up with a jerk.

"Is that straight?" asked Mack.

"True as I live. I would not lie to you," quavered the boy, and his weak, swarthy face flushed painfully.

Mack jerked the receiver from its hook and called the central office roughly: "Hello! Hello! Gimme 'Three-double O, North.' . . . . Yes, and don't die on your feet, will you? . . . . All right, ma'am. . . . . Yes, ma'am. . . . Excuse me. I thought it was that fresh guy that was on last night. . . . . Hello! 'Three-double O, North?' . . . N'em mind who. Is the boss there? . . . The proprietor? . . . . Well, git him, you dub; n'em mind who I am. You git him to the wire or I 'll come up there and smash you. I know youse tight-breeches kind, all right. . . . . Who? . . . . Yes, the boss. . . . . All right. I 'll lick you good, first time you come to Van Buren Street Station . . . . Yes, I 'm a-waitin'."

"He 's gittin' him," said Mack, "but he did n't want to. Said the old gent 's in bed. What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him the prodigal son has returned. They will understand. Tell him how to get here," the boy finished with a sob, as Mack turned quickly and stared into the opening of the transmitter, as a terrier watches a hole.

"Yes, mister; it 's me. . . . . Mack Albry. . . . . What? . . . . It 's us switchmen down to the viaduct. Twelfth Street, off of Wabash Avenue. The prodigal 's got back. . . . . What? . . . . Yep. He 's here with us. Sick. . . . . Yes. . . . . No. . . . . He don't want to talk none. Come on down Wabash to Twelfth, and turn west. Some of us switchmen will be layin' fer you, if you git here before '48' comes in. . . . . What? . . . . That 's Omaha fast freight. Better bring a gun with you, but don't shoot at nobody that holds you up with a lamp. . . . Oh, that 's all right. . . . . So long, mister."

"What 's a prodigal?" growled Jack Mixer, from the far side of the stove.

"Don't you know?" rejoined Mack savagely, with a sneer that was overdone, perhaps, in the effort to cover the sick man's evident distress. "Did n't you never go into the Pacific Garden Mission and hear 'em tell it? It 's sure an all-right story."

"I don't go to no Missions," snorted Mixer. "How does it go, huh?"

"Well, as near as I could flag it, they was a young guy, some like me friend here," responded Albry, dropping down near the boy, "what never did have to work none heavy, 'cause his old man liked him too well to do what would 'a been best fer him. He was the youngest, this young fellow was, and he had a big dub of a brother that had to cut out most of the freight and throw switches fer the hull yard at home. Looked to me as if the old man sort of put onto the big feller stronger than I 'd 'a stood fer; but my old man — Oh, n'em mind *me*.

"Well, the young fellow, he keeps playin' around till he grows up; sassin' the old man and the big dub, till final he says to the old man if he 'll give him his share of the butter and eggs and things, these fellows was all Rubes, you mind, why he 'll pull his freight on out, like toward Evanston or Blue Island or somewheres, and do his own car-handlin'. The old man asks him can he run a yard hisself and he thinks yes.

"So, the old duck, he means right by the boy, and besides that he 's gettin' kind o' sick of his doin's by now, and he gives him his stuff, easy, like a pay-check, and tells him Merry Christmas, and all them things, and lets him go. Kind as a father to him, he was."

"Aw, you pulled that car once," said Mixer, who was watching the tale for points as he watched the yard for signals.

"What 's a matter with you?" barked Albry. "Do you want to tell this? What car did I move onct?"

"You said the old man was the boy's old man, did n't you?" flared Mixer. "What 's the use chawin' on that all night?"

"He was kind as a father to him, and that settles it," roared Mack. "I 'm a-tellin' this. So the young feller he goes out and 'stead of goin' up Edgewater way, or wherever, he puts right out fer Custom House Place, or like that, and gets in amongst that gang and they just makes a mess of him and takes his pay-check too quick. What the con men did n't get the women took off o' him, and first he knows he 's out at the stock yards with an old reliever suit onto him that he got in Clark Street and so hungry that he 's huntin' fer acorns under the oak trees in front of Transit House.

"Well, some kind Rube from down the State comes in with a car of hogs and gives this little guy a job helpin' chase 'em into the stock yards and feed 'em, and by then the little duck 's so hungry that he 's eatin' corncobs when the hog man finds him. So after he gets done out there he thinks he 'll go back home and strike the old man fer a job, but he ain't sure how the old man will take it, him spendin' his stuff so soon and comin' back in some other feller's old clothes.

"Well, he starts back, anyway, same as me friend here, only he 's a husky little duck and ain't sick none and, thinks he, he 'll make the best front he can of it; and that 's right, and don't you make no mistake about it. Always keep a-chirpin'. So he goes back, afoot though, 'cause they ain't no freights runnin' just then, and when he gets about down the river to Goose Island, or like that, why the old man he gets wind of it some way and he near about throws a fit he 's so glad.

" But the young guy, he don't know this none, and he comes hoboein' along through town and on out to where his folks lives, and when he gets about there the old man runs out and grabs him and they clinches. Now, the other Rubes, they don't know the young feller in his Clark Street togs and they thinks it 's a scrap with a hoboe, and them and the big dub brother comes a-runnin' with the couplin'-pins out of the ploughs, and them things, and they are goin' to mix it with him, just like us switchmen when a tough guy drops off of the trucks here.

" But the old man, he says fenanny, or like that, and tells 'em who it is, and they 're to ketch a calf, and get a fat one, and get ready fer a reg'lar barbecue. He takes the boy in right, and when the big dub brother, that 's had to smash all the squash-bugs all summer hisself, kicks, the old man stands pat fer the little feller, and tells them he 's thinkin' more of him just then than he is of the hull bunch of the home guys, 'cause the little feller was lost and now he 's found.

" And from the way the old gent's voice shook when he was talkin' to me on the wire a little while ago, I 'm thinkin' that 's the way it 's goin' to be up there at that big house on the Lake Shore Drive, as soon as he gits this young gent up there.

" That 's all they was to it over at the Mission, only a lot of other talk that was dead right, about what is and had n't ought to 'a been, or something like that. Anyway, I did n't get the rest of it quite pat, after the young duck won out. I 'm a-goin' up under the viaduct now to watch fer your old man, pardner, and I 'm thinkin' he 'll be down here some before we have to go cuttin' up '48.' "

The roar of the yard engines went up hollowly into the night as the door swung open, and the lanterns of the other track crews flitted like belated fireflies in the wintry air. The crash of colliding cars drowned or mingled with laughter and curses that relieved tense nerves of hardy, good-hearted fellows working at high pressure among the countless dangers of the night, until presently there came into the squalid little switch shanty a group as strange as any that ever gathered in the viaduct yard. And what has not happened there, at one time or other, has little to do with human affairs.

Albry's clear white lantern came dancing down between the close-set tracks, and in the small circle of its shifting light a little lady, her face dissolved with mother-love, rustled in dainty silks and shrank among her heavy sables. Beside her strode a stalwart old man whose blue eyes flashed out from under his silvery hair, with a gleam keen as the point of a knife. His hand tensely clutched something in the pocket of his great fur coat, and looking over Albry's head into the farther blackness of the big yards, he was saying, " I don't know about this for you, Mother. I don't know. But maybe we would better see it through, if you can."

" Oh, I must. I will," she said as Albry stopped with his hand upon the knob of the shanty door.

" This is it, mister," said Mack. " We 're all-right people here. Come in," he said as he pushed the narrow door open. Entering, he raised his lantern above his head and, as the boy turned his haggard face to the light, said: " Is that him, ma'am? "

But, without answer, the little mother dropped to her knees beside the rough plank upon which he lay, and her shimmering silks swept the grimy floor as she laughed, and moaned, and crooned, and wept over the sobbing boy.

The old man stood shaken at the sight and turning at last to Mack, said: "Man, what can I do to repay my debt to you?"

"What can we do?" echoed the tremulous voice of the mother.

"I guess nothin', ma'am," said Albry quietly, "less you 'd shake hands with me. I never knowed me mother."

"Oh, you *man!* You good young man. You have given me back my son, my baby boy," cried the little woman, and wept afresh.

Then she sprang up, and raising her face she encircled Mack's burly neck with her arms and drew his big red head down to her shoulder and kissed him once, and again, on his grimy forehead.

"Thanks," said Albry in confusion, and turning to the farther corner called gruffly to Mixer: "Come on, you."

They went out, and in a moment returned with a shutter from the shanty. On it they laid the half-conscious boy and the old man drew from his pocket a wicked-looking revolver and pitched it through the door into the darkness; stripped off his heavy furs, and swathed them tenderly over the thin garb of his son. Then the little group wound away with swaying lights through the uproar of the yards to where a pair of champing bays stood with crested brougham, footman and coachman waiting under the black viaduct on Twelfth Street. And Summer stood in the shadows and watched.

As they reached the carriage, the old man turned to Mack and said: "If ever you need a friend, my boys, you know the name and the place. Money if you ever need, but I offer none now to men as big-hearted as you. Good-night," and they were gone.

When Albry and Mixer returned with the shutter, Mixer raised his light to Albry's face and said: "You called the turn with that there yarn of yourn."

There were two big dirty smears below Mack's eyes, as he blinked at the light for an instant. Then he said, "Forty-eight 's in. Come on," and plunged across the tracks to begin the remaining night's work.

Summer was all right in his way, but his business was that of catching thieves, and all men were thieves to him until they were proven innocent. Even then, he doubted them. He was crestfallen and dishonored before the yard. It was as much as his job was worth to be knocked out by a switchman, if the story got to headquarters, and he was boiling with wrath and the desire to redeem his reputation. In short, he was there to take Mack into headquarters, and his anger drove him into taking the wrong time for it. He skulked along the dark line of "48" until he reached the point where Albry was working, and when Albry's right hand shot high above his head to swing a signal, a pair of hand-cuffs flashed suddenly in the light of the lantern. One of the steel loops snapped at his wrist but fell short, and Summer lunged heavily against Mack, from the force of his spring out of the darkness.

Albry's lantern did not pause in its circling swing, but he changed its course and curved the weight of his big chest into the blow as the heavy lantern crashed into Summer's glowering face and cut him to the bone. Summer ground a savage oath between his teeth and they clinched, and strained, and fell, as a rumble ran through the long line of freight in answer to Mack's signal. The light went out with the blow that was struck, and now it was Albry and now Summer atop, as they throttled, and struck, and cursed, and rolled upon the ground. Only Albry knew the signal he had given, and that death was bearing down silently upon them both. Fighting his throat free from Summer's clutch, for a moment, he gasped: "You fool, they 're coming back on us!"

Summer leaped up and tried to drag him to his feet, but too late. The heavy wheels ground over Mack's good stout leg and left him a weltering, pitiful thing by the track, with Summer dazed and horror-stricken, standing by.

They hurried him across to the railroad ward in St. Luke's by the lake, and when they laid him upon the glazed table in the little white operating room he forced their hands clear and tried to sit up, saying, "Let me see it!"

"Oh, no," said the little white-capped nurse, as she gently forced him back. "You could n't do that, you know. Lie down now, that 's a good boy."

"Let me see it, I tell you," he shouted, strong yet in the numbness of shock.

"Let him see," said Tom Maxon, the young surgeon, after looking steadily into Mack's face for a moment. "We will fix you up all right, my boy," he added in kind assurance like that of his veteran uncle of Alta Vista.

They raised him up. He looked carefully at his mangled ankle and settled back saying, "Fix me up, eh? Yes, I know what that means. I 've seen that kind fixed up before.

"Say, Mixer knows where. You tell him to ask her if she 'll come to see me to-morrow. Tell her I 'll wait. Say! What 's chokin' me that way?"

"Yes, he will go," said the nurse, as Mixer touched Mack's hand and then tiptoed from the room.

"Now, I'm going to put this over your face for a little while," the nurse smiled down at Albry, "and you must say, slowly, 'I feel it,' until I ask you to stop. Will you?" she questioned with the cheerful air of beginning some rare, glad lark.

"Yes," said Mack, from under the loose cone. "I feel it. I — feel — it. I — I —" and then he floated out upon the fanciful field of anæsthetic dreams and said no more, nor even moaned.

He "waited" and in the morning the champing bays pranced in the wintry sunshine outside St. Luke's while, within, Tom Maxon, surgeon, was saying to the Prodigal's stately parents:

"Albry? Oh, yes. Yes, received last night. Well, sir, you may as well see him — now."

"Is it that?" the man asked.

"I think it is," said Maxon. "I believe so. There is no certainty in advance, in such a case. He was strong, very strong, and might well have weathered the leg. But, there is a stupor, a chest injury, perhaps, that is puzzling. Is he —"

"He is mine," said the old man. "Living or — passing, please do not forget that he is as mine."

The words that had leaped angrily from Mack's lips in the railroad yard bore a new meaning when thus unknowingly repeated in loving kindness. On his cot, in the long white line of the ward, Albry was tossing weakly, in half consciousness. He roused and then quieted at the touch of the woman's hand and to her questions said:

"Yes, I know you. I got scared — lonesome, last night. Do you mind? There 's nobody but the boys in the yard, for me, all busy. I wish you 'd stay — just for comp'ny."

While Maxon passed gravely on to the next cot in line, they drew closer to Albry and dried what seemed the death-damp from his face and together they said:

"You have us, son, and we will stay. You will not fear, but sleep now."

Then he wandered again: "This — house — chokes me! Are the boys lookin'? Don't they hear me? Who are they? This — house —" his voice trailed off more faintly and his eyes closed drowsily.

"'In my Father's house are many mansions,'" soothingly whispered the kneeling woman, with her lips close to his dulling ear, "'if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.'

"He is looking. He hears you."

"For — me? *My* — father?" whispered Mack, simply as a little child.

"Yes, son," spoke the man's vibrant voice. "Your Father. Our Father. Now sleep."

The little woman shook with voiceless sobbing, her silvery hair mingling with the tangled red of the weary head upon the pillows. Then, the fading senses rallied to a greater effort, Mack's sturdy arms went once aloft in the oft-used go-ahead signal, sank slowly, fluttered up again and sank, as he settled into a deeper quiet.

"'Greater love hath no man than this,'" said the old man, as his head went down beside that other silvery head that bowed beside the peaceful face of Mack.

"He gave his life for us and ours," she softly said.

"Hush!" whispered the voice of Tom Maxon.

Lifting their faces in breathless silence, the visitors watched the young surgeon, who had silently returned and was clinging gently to the limp wrist. A gleam of surprise and gratification grew in his eyes. After a tense minute, he released Albry's wrist, listened in a surprised way with his ear against the almost motionless chest, then beckoned them to follow him away into the ward.

"It is not what you thought — what I feared — but a most gratifying rally of a wonderful body," he said when they had reached a right distance from the cot. "I will not ask what you said or did before I returned — perhaps nothing that would seem significant — but something has turned the tide in his favor. He may have lacked just the close touch of friends.

"He is now relaxed and free from shock — Oh, no! It is not dissolution. He is sleeping, almost naturally, for the first time since we received him."

"Then you have a hope for him?" questioned the old man, anxiously.

"Every hope, now. He will live," answered Maxon, quite positively. "The heart is a mysterious engine."

Sitting, one evening some weeks later, where the glinting waters of Lake Michigan tumbled and rippled almost at his door, the white-haired director of the railroad which had returned to him his wayward son and, for that service, taken its heavy toll of Mack Albry, sat talking quietly with Sharer, the general manager.

"Sharer," he was saying, "there is a matter that is rather close to my heart and in which I should like to enlist your interest.

"My son, who was — lost, has been returned to me. You know something of it — quite enough, in fact, as to the main event. You know, also, that there is a young man, Mack Albry, who will presently be discharged, as cured, from St. Luke's, and that, by action of the board, the company undertakes to educate and place him, as being of a desirable metal, which the road requires.

"That, it has been decided, is all quite regular and good railroad business. My personal obligation to Albry I am discharging in a way of my own choosing.

"There is another young man, however, one Joe Harper, who, as I have recently learned, has placed me under an obligation that cannot be so readily met. I am told that he is employed somewhere upon our lines. Do you happen to know of him?"

"Quite well, by common report, which is distinctly favorable to him," replied Sharer.

"Then," said the director, "I shall add only this: He seems to have shown a soundness of judgment and an ability to control men by persuasion, which would warrant giving him the fullest opportunity to prove his fitness for advancement in the service.

"If you will gauge him in your own way, as occasions offer, I shall note the outcome, with much interest."

Harper's bread had begun its long return upon the railroad waters.

CHAPTER XI

HORRIGAN'S MEDAL

"OH, he's not so bad, sometimes," contended fireman McPeltrie, whose feet were dangling from the idle baggage truck on Villa Rica station platform. "I can carry as thin a fire, with Horrigan up, as with any engineer on the division."

"He's a big wind, and no cyclone-cellar handy!" declared conductor Waverly. "And I hope he don't pull me, if I'm called for one of the specials. He keeps me feeling that things are going to happen soon."

Waverly spoke with the fixed belief and deep unction of an experienced conductor measuring up a comparatively new engineer.

"Horrigan has too many things on his mind, and he can't seem to keep them there. He's always slopping over into talk," Waverly continued.

"If you were to ask him for a chew of tobacco, in the dark, at a water tank, on short time, he'd very likely give it, if he had it on him. But, before you could get him to pull out for the next siding, he'd start a lecture on what tobacco does to the solar plexus.

"And, if you were to turn hot under the collar and throw out your cud, on the strength of that talk while you're trying to get him started, he'd sure turn in at the next stop and give you facts and figures, world without end, on what tobacco is costing the United States, and what per cent of it 's wasted through rough handling.

"Horrigan knows too damned much, besides running engine! When I break away from him, I always feel as if I 'd been sunburned, grabbed by the neck, and dipped in a creek."

"That 's whatever," supplemented Red Jones, the brakeman. "He cert'ny scares me 'way up into the high rocks, when he gets talking in full release.

"But, he knows engine — don't you never doubt it — and, if he pulls us on special, we 'll go where the rest of them go. You can bet on it!"

While he was thus, in theory, being taken apart and rebuilt upon the spur of the moment, the engineer whom they had been discussing finished his walk across the tracks after leaving the group of talkers, and was humming a happy, nervous sort of nothing, in the way of a tune, as he stooped and touched, here and there, about his engine, which was waiting at the coal chutes, just over the way.

Horrigan did not rightly belong on Villa Rica division. This was not because he had not been brought up there, although that fact operated as a handicap against him just at first, as it does against any man coming new to the special requirements of the mountain service. Dinwiddy, with his keen master mechanic's insight into the character of men, had felt some slight aversion to him on sight, but was too fair-minded and was needing men too badly to let that feeling debar him without trial. Evidently, he was not the type of man that Enderby, Muller, Dodson, and others of the initiated would hail with acclaim, but he was taken on probation, in short, as men are taken there, and while he had succeeded in weathering the test to the point where he had acquired rights on extra passenger runs, yet he somehow did not seem to belong.

He was a free and somewhat able talker and seemed to have more than the ordinary predilection for what is commonly called a play to the grandstand. Even that might have passed the broad tolerance of the men of the division, had he not possessed the unhappy faculty of injecting into his ever ready speech a vitriolic tang that sent the comfort of common talk a-glimmering from any conversation in which he engaged and left his hearers with an unreasonable sense of shame for which, however, they never could quite account. Not easily defined, it was to them somewhat as though they had been detected in the absurdity of trying to fix a hex-headed bolt into a square countersink and perhaps that was really the trouble, in a sense. Horrigan had too many angles. He did not fit there.

That was the way matters stood when the Society for the Promotion of Peace on Earth sent some thousands of its members upon a well-timed pilgrimage across the continent, and when the return journey began, Villa Rica division, like the rest of the line, went into careful and complete preparations for handling the six heavily laden sections of the special traffic, which was scheduled to run as Number Two, with regular Number Two carrying extra coaches and heading the movement, as first section.

When the great day on the division arrived, Dodson's rights gave him Number Two, first section, Muller was posted upon the roundhouse board as next out, for the second section, Horrigan was drawn from the freight crews and assigned to the engine of Third Number Two, and Mark Enderby, with McPeltrie firing, was returning with the Overland in time to take out Fourth Number Two, for which he was already posted upon the board. The other two engines of the extra sections were to be manned by freight crews, not yet returned but closely nearing Villa Rica.

Among those who were in the roundhouse that morning there was a pregnant silence, for the most part born of a deep sense of the responsibility of handling the living six sections that were laboring onward from the coast. Horrigan, alone, seemed to find it an occasion for much speaking, and stimulated to greater than usual effort by the sense of his own responsibility, he descanted loudly and long upon how the thing should be done to redound with proper glory to the division. Dinwiddy, as he chanced by, Dodson, Muller, and some others listened as briefly as possible, and one by one slipped quietly away.

Duly, Number Two trailed down off the mountain-side and came safely to rest in Villa Rica. The happy, zealous occupants of its ten coaches swarmed out and cheered, to the echo, the crew that had brought them safely one stage upon their return. They cheered, as heartily, the engine and crew that backed down upon the train to take up the journey afresh, and Number Two went strongly and gayly upon its way, under the hand of Dodson, intent but unperturbed.

When Second Number Two arrived all this was done again, Muller and Villa Rica in general taking on a quiet exultation at their unwonted celebrity, while Horrigan, with his preparations made and his engine standing ready, was circulating freely with the throng, shaking hands with the pilgrims, telling them in awe-inspiring periods how the thing was being done and what he, too, was about to do. The rest of Villa Rica, of course, was as glad as he, but it was very quiet in its gladness, well knowing that while there are trains there are chances.

Muller with this Second Number Two was well away when Third Number Two came down and disgorged its burden of enthusiasts. They swarmed around Horrigan's engine, just before the start, and cheered and cheered again, yielding at last only to the polite but urgent insistence of Waverly, the conductor, and of the trainmen who were trying with little success to gather them all quickly back into the train. Horrigan's too effusive greetings and responses from the cab window were holding them.

Finally, they reached the climax of their enthusiasm, and as the tide set back toward the coaches, their long-sustained excitement, their gratitude for safety through many perils but dimly understood, and their longing for definite expression centred upon the well-meaning but too demonstrative Horrigan at the cab window. The great volume of voices trailed off from its cheering into the dear old hymn of benediction: "God be with you till we meet again."

With that appealing strain, pleading that "death's threatening wave" be smitten before him, wafting to his ears from the train Horrigan pulled out with Third Number Two's ten coaches and with a suspicion of more than usual moisture in his eyes. Horrigan was very far from being a hard man. He was a hard talker, that was all.

Horrigan's present triumph was brief, complete, and, to him, most satisfying while it lasted. He wheeled them away magnificently up the first great rise that offers its resistance to Villa Rica men, and having vanished through the notch of the eastern pass, began dropping down the long reaches of the Eleven-mile Hill with all of the assurance that careful preparation could give. His heart was beating high with the warmth of the enthusiasm of which he had unexpectedly become the central object at Villa Rica and he saw himself thenceforth a towering figure in the division annals. The run ahead held no special difficulties and he let the train soar down in wide, breathless sweeps that brought joy to the hearts of the travellers and keyed him to a keener gladness in his work.

With the throttle closed and the reverse lever latched well down ahead for drifting, he was sailing them, free as an eagle's flight, where he dared, fondling the brake-valve handle and holding them safely, where he must, with all going well, so far as he could know, while back in the crowded coaches further campaigns of peace on earth, good-will to men, were being planned and song relieved the weariness of the journey.

Then, without warning and from no fault of his, disaster fell upon Horrigan and rudely disturbed the confidence of his passengers in their engineer. Deep down in a vital spot of his engine a little detailed fracture had been growing for many months, where no outward search could detect it, and in the regular course of daily events no foresight or care could defeat its growth.

Close in behind the collar of the main-pin, securely hidden within its fit in the wheel, the little thread-like fracture had been gnawing into the circumference of the pin. Little by little, it had eaten toward the heart of the pin until now, with the rods fanning the air in a steely blur of light and the wheels humming in dull monotone in the rushing air, the great pin was quivering upon its remaining solid core and no one could guess the fact.

Half way down the Eleven-mile grade, just when Horrigan had yielded to the temptation of one proud backward look at the inner side of the flying curve of the train, the overtaxed pin let go. There was only an instant's crashing jumble of sounds from below before the rods wrenched themselves apart and the swift stripping of his side of the engine began.

In the next moment, the forward working parts broke free with the shattered cylinder and fell in the ditch, while the side-rod, parted at the middle, began its work of flailing off with swift rotary sweeps the cab and after-fittings.

First among these to go were the brake-pipes and reservoir, and when the seat-box went shivering upward in a shower of splinters and tools Horrigan stood upon the deck where he had tumbled without even a chance to touch the brake-valve or move it from the lap, where he had set it previously while all was well. With the train-line torn open and the air gone from equilibrium, the brakes went on with an emergency application that set the coaches bumping upon their trucks and put in sudden motion a series of wild gymnastics among the passengers all unprepared.

Before they were fairly untangled from their catapult departures over the tops of car seats and unannounced arrivals in each other's laps, the train had ground itself to an abrupt stop. Then they shook themselves out of the tangle, and hurriedly as conductor Waverly had moved to the front at the first jolt, yet they were flocking to the engine ahead of him.

There he found them, rapidly increasing from a bevy to hundreds, close around the damaged engine, and, standing erect in the ruins of the cab, the whole side of which was torn off and gone, was Horrigan with his hand clutching the only projection that remained in reach, which happened to be the handle of the now useless brake-valve.

Horrigan's cap was gone, his blouse was ripped up the back, and there was one bright spot of blood sending down a trickle of crimson upon his cheek where a splinter had grazed him. He certainly looked the conventional hero, and as the little human eddy of passengers swirled into a constantly widening pool of frightened humanity about the engine, a murmur of admiration rose and grew until it broke forth into ringing cheer after cheer, punctuated with cries of "Speech! Speech! Speech!"

None but a man built upon Horrigan's lines would have thought for a single moment of responding to this hysterical demand, under the circumstances, and perhaps not even Horrigan would have done so, had he not, just previously, been frozen stiff with fright and astonishment while the delight of his ovation at Villa Rica was still surging in his mind. The latter, apparently, was the first clear idea to free itself in his shocked senses, and with the entire train's company for audience — all save one lonely figure that shot out from the rear of the last coach and went running up the grade — Horrigan clutched the useless brake-valve handle spasmodically and began upon a stammering speech.

Waverly, running, and thrusting his wiry body unceremoniously through the closely packed crowd, had reached the distorted gangway between engine and tender. He had seized the hand-iron of the tender and was thrusting his foot into the step-iron when Horrigan's first halting words sounded. Waverly stopped as though stricken powerless, with his foot in the air, as the monstrous folly of the thing made its way to his quick senses, but only for a single look upward into Horrigan's distorted and painfully working face. Then Waverly's white face went even whiter with suppressed wrath and he sprang up the step and upon the littered deck and stood tensely with the fireman, close behind Horrigan's shoulder.

He permitted Horrigan to ramble through a few sentences of rather pointless platitudes, and at the first tangible halt in Horrigan's now rapid utterance, he stepped in front of him with a ghastly smile, seized his free right hand in a crushing grip and shook it ostentatiously for the benefit of the intent audience below. With his back turned to the passengers and his eyes boring fiercely into the eyes of the engineer, he was saying while his grip tightened:

"Horrigan, you damned grandstand player, you have n't done a thing here but roll in luck and you know it! If you don't cut this out and get down and clean up the pins, so Enderby on Fourth Two can help us down the hill, I 'll pound you to a frazzle right here on your own deck! Get some tools and get down!"

Then he released his fierce grip upon Horrigan's hand, turned with a strained smile to the cheering audience below, and removing his cap bowed to them most suavely while Horrigan turned hastily to the tool-box upon the tender. A few moments later, both of them, with the fireman, were thrusting the crowd back from below while the broken rods were stripped off and the crippled engine made ready for movement with help from the coming fourth section.

In the few moments that this byplay had occupied, the single man of all the train's people who had not rushed toward the engine, but, true to his great trust, called peremptorily without a moment's warning save that of his own knowledge of his own special task, Red Bill Jones, had caught up his flag with its dangling sack of torpedoes and was running swiftly up the grade at the rear.

Previously, there had been nothing to distinguish him, in road talk, from Black Bill Jones except the qualifying adjectives of color which the road parlance had supplied.

Thereafter, however, a less pointedly personal distinction was to endure. He was to be remembered and designated by the result of rising to his suddenly presented opportunity.

Two train-lengths up the wide curving grade the track was lost from sight in the deep and narrow Spire Cut and beyond that the swell of the mountain hid it for a mile, down which Enderby with Fourth Two would soon be bowling. Red Jones ran swiftly to the Spire Cut, fumbling the while with the string of the torpedo bag, meaning to make assurance doubly sure by setting explosive signals in the cut before running farther in the concealing curve to meet the oncoming section. Thus absorbed in his double duty, a vagrant wedge of rock caught his foot and threw him heavily from the track upon his shoulder, into the ditch.

With a muttered imprecation, he scrambled hastily to his feet and much to his astonishment fell over again quite helplessly upon the spot from which he had arisen. A piercing stab of pain shot through his ankle, and when a second effort to rise resulted in a second fall, he examined the offending ankle to find it dislocated and his foot badly awry.

He set his teeth grimly and tugged at the anguished foot as at a boot but it would not right, and he gave up the effort quickly. He crawled back up the ballasted bank of the track and bent a signal-cap upon the rail. He crept an engine-length and bent another cap upon the rail. Then he began the long crawl upon hands and knees, up the grade in the cut, with the flag. The ragged rock ballast riddled his clothing and bit cruelly into his naked knees but he held to the middle of the track with the flag wavering and upended before him, even though he left a dull, irregular trailing stain of blood upon the ballast.

Once he fainted for a moment, with the flag stretched out upon the rail before him and his face fallen among the broken rock, then he came back to the pulsing anguish of his disjointed ankle and crept forward again until he heard the distant booming of Fourth Number Two's whistle at the approach to the Spire Cut. He stood up then, leaning upon the flag-staff for support until the black muzzle of the coming engine shot into sight. He raised the flag aloft, waved it in wide and steady sweeps across the track until the deep note of the whistle barked briefly twice in acknowledgment, then he laid the flag carefully upon the rail, spread it to its full length, and rolled over into the ditch, as senseless as the ties bedded in the track. He was game to the last conscious beat of his heart.

Enderby and McPeltrie lifted him to the engine cab, when they had stopped, and quickly brought him back to consciousness. They dropped cautiously down through the Spire Cut and coupled in at the rear of Third Number Two and helped them down the hill, while Red Jones lay quietly upon a plank that slanted forward from McPeltrie's seat-box, in the engine of Fourth Number Two. And the kindly members of The Society for the Promotion of Peace on Earth knew nothing of Red Jones or his doings. They were discussing, in subdued tones of gratitude and admiration, Horrigan, the brave engineer who had stood dauntlessly and alone in the wreck of his post and saved them from a dreadful fate — just what, they were not so clear upon. And Horrigan was a brave man, in common measure.

So, with this single interruption, the splendid movement of the precious six sections went smoothly on. The day saw Villa Rica division well and creditably clear of its great responsibility, and in the days immediately following the respective parts played by Horrigan and Red Jones in the Spire Cut affair became a serious bone of contention. The whole bitterly fought, old question of the comparative danger and bravery of the several posts in train service was reopened with a zest, and, sometimes a venom that it had never previously attained. But the subject was wearing itself out and bade fair to subside, when a most unfortunate event tore all aching wounds and lacerated feelings open, afresh.

There was not a man in Villa Rica, belonging to the service, who did not fully understand that when Horrigan was discovered clutching the brake-valve handle he might as well have been holding to the empty casing of a burned-out rocket, so far as the safety of the train had been concerned, and that the almost human action of the wonderful brake mechanism had automatically taken care of its priceless human freight, at the first crash and without any possible assistance from Horrigan.

Horrigan had, indeed, been a towering figure in the discussion, whether he would or no, but he had found himself strictly on the defensive, for the once, and having made the best stand he could against the none too gentle impeachment and innuendo which constantly assailed him, there had been times when he was driven almost to the point of unobtrusively leaving Villa Rica. But the saving reaction had come, at last, and Villa Rica was inclined to leave him to extract whatever of satisfaction he might from the situation, and say no more.

Then came the misfortune. Horrigan was sitting upon a baggage truck at the station, one day some six weeks after the Spire Cut doings, talking, with returning confidence, to a group of roadmen standing about. Down the narrow stairway that ascended to the assistant superintendent's office, just back of them, a clerk came clattering into the midst of them.

"See Horrigan around here anywhere?" he asked briskly. "Oh!" he added, as the group opened a little farther and brought Horrigan into view upon the truck.

"Say, Horrigan, the Old Man has a letter up there from those Peace on Earth people, asking him to give you this package and to read these resolutions to you, and give them to you, too — 'In some suitable public place,' the letter says.

"The Old Man says he 's too busy and I 'm It. Ready?" he asked, handing the sealed package to Horrigan and opening a richly bound and engrossed document which he retained.

Horrigan blankly accepted the package and, for the rest of it, never had an opportunity to answer. A shout of wild derision went up and men slapped each other upon the back, while they demanded of the clerk that he proceed with the reading. Horrigan sat and said nothing.

With due identification, dates and preliminaries, the document opened, and the listeners granted the clerk the courtesy of silence. He began the reading:

> "Whereas, In the course of this, our human life, there are many deadly perils in which men should stand firmly, one with another, and
>
> "Whereas; The qualities of human courage and endurance are always to be desired and commended but more especially in the times of stress and danger where only the utmost courage will suffice, and
>
> "Whereas; Our brave and kindly fellow citizen, Jonas Farwell Horrigan did, on the Eighth day of August, in the year of our Lord One Thousand, Nine Hundred and Blank, exhibit and employ these admirable

qualities, in acts of conspicuous heroism and bravery, to our lasting good and gratitude, therefore, be it, and it is

"Resolved, That we, a Committee of the Society for the Promotion of Peace on Earth, duly appointed and assembled, do, herein, this day and date, extend to Jonas Farwell Horrigan the sincere thanks and the undying respect of this Association, and it is

"Resolved, That a medal of gold, appropriately designed, shall be provided and presented to Jonas Farwell Horrigan, with a suitably engrossed copy of these resolutions, and it is

"Resolved, That a copy of these resolutions be spread upon the minutes of this Association, in further loving remembrance of Jonas Farwell Horrigan."

The signatures followed in due order, and when the voice of the clerk ceased, he handed the document to Horrigan in a dead silence that contrasted sharply with the earlier burst of derision. Apparently, nobody now felt moved to laughter. The thing held too much of earnest belief in itself, in Horrigan, too much of the rare, good milk of human kindness. Who could laugh at such a motive, whatever its objective might be? Nobody laughed. They who listened had almost come to believe in Horrigan's heroism, against their own expert knowledge of the event in question. Horrigan had come, almost, to believe in it himself. He had done what he could, he was reasoning. "Nothing," prompted his inner consciousness. But his pride insisted, and, meanwhile, he was sitting, pale-faced and with downcast eyes, looking at the unopened package in his hand.

"Open it, Horrigan," said some one very quietly. "Let 's see the medal."

He removed the firm wrappings and sprung the little clasp, exposing the beautiful thing upon its cushion of purple. Depending from its richly chased cross-bar was a liberal circle of solid red gold like that of olden Rome and upon its polished face this inscription:

To
JONAS FARWELL HORRIGAN
From
THE S. P. P. O. E.
For Conspicuous Heroism
August 8th, 190—.

The reverse side bore in bas-relief the heroic figure of a man, warding off, with bared arm upraised, some unseen danger, before the advance of which a girlish figure cowered at his feet. A trophy, truly, fit to commemorate the best endeavor of any man, when taken with the earnest message of its presentation.

That, until the time of his going from Villa Rica, was the one occasion upon which Horrigan, being present, said nothing. Having fully complied with the request of those who stood about him, he folded his possessions away, and rising, passed thoughtfully up the street, alone.

When he had gone, one of those who lingered, McPeltrie, ventured the opinion that the deal was n't so far off, anyhow. Horrigan had stayed with the engine. He was there, ready to do what he could, and a man who had gone through what he had at Spire Cut and come out of it with as good as a whole skin was, maybe, entitled to all he could get for it.

But, it would not do. They all knew the truth and the truth would not down. Red Bill Jones was the only hero of Villa Rica and Spire Cut and Bill was nameless, except upon Villa Rica division. It was not right, and they liked right, first, and glory afterward.

Then it began, all over again. Somebody hooted from the caboose-track when Horrigan pulled out next day. Somebody laughed when he signed his report upon the work-book, at his return. Somebody tried to repeat the resolutions from memory, in a caboose that was joggling along over the division the following night, and the following morning found a savage screed of doggerel verse posted upon the freight house, in the unfolding of which Horrigan was made to suffer by comparison, while Red Bill Jones was glorified.

It crept into the conversation at the hotel tables when Horrigan could not escape and was not directly addressed. He met it, by implication, at every street corner and even saw the reflex of it in the faces of the children who passed him in the street. He bore it, sometimes in fiercely outspoken anger, sometimes in sullen silence, until, looking from his cab window close against the coal chutes, one evening when just about to pull down into the yards for the start upon a night run, he found a four-foot placard staring at him from the wooden face of the chutes.

Evidently produced with much labor and the aid of a marking-brush, borrowed from the freight house, this is what he read:

The Eagle Eye stood on the deck,
The flagman's hair was red,
That deck was busted good and hard,
The brake-valve sure was dead.

"Aw, what 's the use?" the boys all said,
"The Flagman was the stuff!"
But the people seen the Eagle Eye
And never called his bluff.

Nothing very serious, this, in the way of an indictment, and yet, it struck so close to Horrigan's own inner sense of the situation that it was the one last straw that he could not bear.

Looking at his watch in white-faced anger, he found he had time to return to the hotel across the tracks. Crossing hastily, he packed into an irregular bundle his few possessions, gave an order at the hotel desk against his wages due, took the remaining balance due him in cash from the hotel clerk's hand when his bill had been deducted, and making his way back to the engine without encountering anybody, climbed aboard with his bundle and in due time departed upon his run.

When he reached Balceta, at the farther end of the division, late that night, he made his simple preparations, silently folded the tent of his tenure upon the Villa Rica division, as it were, and as silently stole away.

It is likely that Villa Rica, in time, might have accustomed itself to the idea of the medal, even though it had never become entirely reconciled. But the engrossed resolutions added, turned loose the muse of every caboose poet on the line, and every line has a large and prolific lot of them, although they will not all confess. After that phase of the matter developed, there was no longer a hope for Horrigan's peace of mind while he remained upon the division.

CHAPTER XII

RECLAIMING SHACKSTON

"WHAT do you-all think of this kleptomania business that pokes up its head, every now and again? And, now, I don't know as I 've said what I aimed to."

Enderby's well-modulated voice had unconsciously lapsed toward the soft vernacular of the high country, and from the far look in his eyes, it was plain that his mind was harking back to earlier days of his life there. Conversation strangely lagged upon the familiar topics with which the morning gathering at the roundhouse water tank had been dallying, and now Enderby's question coupled with its rare inconsistency produced only an uneasy stirring of the group. That nobody answered, in the ready manner of the caucuses at the tank, made it evident that there was an undercurrent astir which no one had yet cared to bring to the surface, even though all were awaiting the decent and orderly development of the latest main topic of Villa Rica doings.

"I carried that boy in my arms when he was a child in swaddling clothes; or near about that," said Enderby, presently. He had correctly assumed that one common thought was buried in the silence which followed his unanswered question.

"What boy?" demanded Muller gruffly, well knowing what the answer would be.

RECLAIMING SHACKSTON

For some months at irregular intervals, the through fast freight to the coast had been showing a series of trifling "shorts" against its manifests and not an "over" had appeared in the locals, or elsewhere, to account for the discrepancies.

Careful checking at terminals left but one conclusion to be drawn: Somebody was stealing from the train, *en route*. Therefore, Summer's special service men had been cruising recently from Alta Vista, on the upper division, to Villa Rica or Balceta on the lower division, at any hour and upon any train that suited their apparently aimless fancies, as hoboe, man-out-of-work, or what-not.

Among the conductors to whom the fast freight was oftenest intrusted was one whose quiet voice and level glance had, with his clear-headed willingness to use every minute the despatcher would give, made for him a friend of every engineer on the division. Thus likeable and greatly liked, he was the last man that Villa Rica would have picked out for the part of a thief, but a final comparison of notes in the process of elimination which had been going on secretly for some weeks left only him as the possible culprit.

And now it had just leaked from the wire that Summer was coming with this man, a prisoner on the eastern mail, and that they would breakfast with the passengers at Villa Rica, before he was taken on to Alta Vista to await trial.

Muller's big engine, vibrant with the spirit of power, action, freedom of the high, wild places, stood glinting in the morning sun, upon the spur track before the depot, waiting and ready to take the coming mail train eastward over the mountain.

The thought of a man whom he knew and liked, being snared out of that bright upper country like an eagle trapped from the rim-rock; shackled and hauled away to a stuffy cage — faugh! Every drop of good red blood in Muller's virile body revolted against the task of pulling a former comrade away from the life and light of the mountains upon such a journey.

Involuntarily, he shut out of his mind the nature of the offence. Nothing seemed, in the calm brightness of that morning, to justify the taking of a mountain man away from his mountains.

"What boy, Enderby?" he repeated in quick impatience.

"Shackston!" replied Enderby, in perfect understanding of Muller's frame of mind.

With his back to the group, he stood, for a moment, looking over against the purple background of the rim-rock, then, turning, he said:

"And now I 'm going to tell you boys something; which is what I 'm thinking, first off, when I put the question to you-all about kleptomania."

Tightening his kindly lips and looking somewhat aggressively at first one and then another of the group, he resumed his seat upon the bench, with much precision.

"It may help toward the right seeing of this business, which I make no delay of saying is a scandal and a sorrow to us all, and to Villa Rica. For I 'm clear in my mind that the boy 's not rightly a thief by nature.

"There 's things bigger than folks's ideas can sometimes rightly sense; things that the A'mighty made to be, for some purpose — and I don't like no dad-danged spotters, nohow; nor never did, so far as that 's concerned!" he broke off abruptly at the close.

"Nor me! I don't consider them human, scarcely; let alone needful," rumbled Muller in quick accord, glad of so ready a vent for his suppressed feelings as this unlooked-for expression from calm and conservative Enderby afforded.

"I would n't go so far as to say they ain't human, hardly. But I say, unhesitating, that it gives me mighty mixed feelings to have 'em scenting around where I 'm working," Enderby conceded.

"Me too!" responded the voice of every man in the group.

"But here 's what I 'm thinking to tell you about," Enderby continued.

"Long enough ago, while I was a young fellow working down yonder as a sort of guard and extra fireman; along about the time that Halpin and some more of us fellows picked up young Dinwiddy; when the construction train was working out toward Balceta, along by the Tonto country, Shackston's folks run the boarding-house car.

"Drifted into the track from out in the Tonto Basin, somewheres; mebbe running shy of grub drove them in, we thought then; but it did n't matter what. We were mighty glad to see the woman come in to cook for us.

"Just the old man Shackston, there was, who 's a worthless sort of cuss, and his young wife, who 's the nearest thing to angels any of us ever saw in that country; and the baby, a boy going three, which is Shackston that 's coming over the mountain, right now, with a ten-pound, lead-soled boot strapped onto him and, like as not, a pair of hand-cuffs, besides.

"It just shakes me, to think of that last!

"Mrs. Shackston was a peart, bright-eyed little woman, and as fine as a fiddle. She dealt the grub for the whole outfit, long as she stayed, which was n't so very long; and good grub as ever you set your teeth to — for them days and places.

" But the old man — how ever she come to be coupled on behind such an old kittle as him is a question in my mind, that 's never been answered yet.

" He made out to keep up the cooking fires and rustle enough wood for the same, times he 's there, but he went, pretty frequent, scouting out far as he dared venture, toward the Tonto Basin, shooting jack rabbits and such small stuff, and saying that he hears of a gold placer, thereabouts, that he expected to dig up, and thereby fix himself proper.

" Did n't nobody give much heed to his goings on, till he got to shipping in regular supplies of forty-rod, with the grub boxes, and tanking up, noisy and quarrelsome, and disappearing for more days at a time with his rifle, over towards the Basin country.

" That, of course, interfered with the grub and had to be looked to. So, we talked to old Shackston some decent about it, but he only got drunker and sassier, until, finally, things worked themselves to a head-ender.

" One night, just as the stars were beginning to show up right bright above the dusk of the plains, old Shackston comes trailing in from somewheres out in the hills, bringing along a scurvy-looking half-breed, and both of them sullen and sour drunk.

" 'T ain't long till he opens up on Mrs. Shackston, mighty cruel and indecent, and allows grub ought to been ready for him and his friend, when he gets home; where 's he been gone all of three days and she 's then setting on an old three-leg stool beside the track, swinging the little fellow back and forth on her knees and singing some of them old tunes that puts young ones to sleep. It all happens mighty quick, you see.

" We 're setting camped around her on the ground, smoking and sort of thinking way back in our heads quiet-like, listening to the music she 's making and kind of liking the sound of the little fellow crowing up at the stars, when old Shackston turns mean and violent, all of a sudden, and begins to tell that he 's got more friends in that country than she has, and like that.

" Well, of course, we see that there 's trouble of some kind coming close, and one or two of the boys gets far enough toward action to tighten up their belts a notch or two, setting as we be, and no clear call as yet to interfere, as betwixt man and wife.

" But not the readiest man in the bunch is reckoning on what happens next.

" With no more notice at all, he pulls a flask of liquor out of his shirt and downs half of it without taking breath, and hands the bottle to the half-breed who, likewise, finishes it, and smashes the bottle to bits against the side of the grub-car; which is all mighty insulting, you see.

" The little fellow, that 's Shackston that 's coming now on the mail, starts up sudden, crying out, childlike, and that seems to loco the worthless old cuss entire.

" He lets out a yell like a sure enough Apache and swings his rifle off of the ground, and the next second the butt of it crashes down on that little woman's head and she rolls off of the stool onto the ground without a moan; and the baby all tumbled up into her lap."

" Did you down him, Pap? " demanded Muller, who was now sitting bolt upright, with both hands clutching the bench.

" Not just then," said Enderby quietly.

" 'T ain't a minute, 't ain't half of that, nor it don't seem like no time at all, sudden as the signal comes to us, till we are all up and at them, but the old renegade downs a couple of our boys with his rifle before we can rightly get into action, and dodging under the grub-car, him and the half-breed mounts a couple of horses that they 've tied up from the bunch the scraper gang 's using that day, and unbeknown to the fellow that was supposed to be guarding them night and day.

" And they get a clean start of us toward the mountains in the dusk — both of them but the half-breed, that is, because I thought best to keep looking after him, close, from the time he struck camp and sidled up towards the woman and the boy.

" He did n't get far beyond t' other side of the grub-car; not far enough to speak of.

" But old Shackston made a clean get-away, for then, hard as we chased him that night, after we had saddled up the work horses that was left.

" By sun-up next morning we had trailed him far enough to see that he was circling toward the Sacromonte country and we knew that if he got into that bunch of rocks and outlaws a regiment could n't get him, lessen he 'd poke up his head for some reason not seen.

" But we kept a-going, with all work stopped at the camp till the finish comes.

" He 's a wolf, that fellow, and knows all the tricks of them. That 's plain to us before we follow him far. On the base of the Sacromonte he gives us the slip complete, doubling back toward the tracks, and we see and hear no more of him, until about sun-down.

" Then, while we are scouting the side of the mountain, among the rocks, a riot breaks out down in the direction of the old stage trail, and we, hurrying down, run fair into Shackston and three Mexicans galloping up the draw of the lower canyon, and there we had it.

"They hopped off and lined up behind the rocks and turned loose a bunch of lead that cost us three men out of the saddle before we could get to cover. It was an hour of sharpshooting, then, with their horses running loose in the smoke, before the Mexicans had burnt all their powder and sneaked away among the rocks, dragging one of their crowd, as it looked afterward.

"It was too hot for them, and they did n't even stop to catch up their horses but left old Shackston to fight it out alone. He was game to the finish, which I mention special, account of its being a good streak in a mighty bad man.

"We holed him up, at last, behind a bowlder, with his gun empty and clubbed, standing with his back to the rock and his feet on the sack of gold that they grabbed off of the buckboard, and him ready and willing to go on fighting for it with his one good arm, his left arm being ball-shattered.

"It 's the contractor's buckboard, which was on the way to pay off the construction gang, and that 's the cause of the uproar we had heard down below.

"The crippled-up guard from the buckboard had patched themselves up some, by then, and came straggling up the side of the mountain, game and good, and it was one of them that run in and clubbed Shackston to a standstill, with his gun-stock, after our gang had settled that he had to be caught alive.

"We splinted his busted arm fast to his rifle-barrel, tied him onto a horse, and took him back to camp at the end of track.

"We held court there, spite of the buckboard guards, that, by then, wanted to take him to headquarters for trial in the territory court.

"When the stars were out again that night, he was swinging all quiet, from the derrick of the timber-car, while the buckboard gun-folks told us how that he was one of the beatenest outlaws and cattle rustlers that ever pestered the Tonto country; and he 'd been that, all unbeknown to the little woman that was then lying, still and peaceful, in the house-car, with her camp lights gone out complete.

"She thought he was square as she was while it appears that, 'stead of prospecting and the like, as he had told her, he 'd turned hold-up entire.

"On her account, we laid 'em away, all decent and respectful, side by side, that night when the moon was climbing up way off over the head of Sacromonte; and that 's the two mounds you see by the track, going by down there, that 's always been kept up, neat like, by the boys setting bits of onyx and such around the borders of them, times when they are laying on the siding, for the mail to go by, or like that.

"No markers nor epitaphs, of course, there being nothing much to say; and it would n't do, nohow, seeing it would have told the whole story to young Shackston, which was no part of the intentions of me and the boys that took him up, so to say, when he 's orphaned that suddenly.

"Yes, the construction camp stood to care for the little chap, until he could be better placed, and one and another of us old-timers made it a point to sort of look after his interests up to the time when he 's able to place himself, man fashion, on the road.

"And I put it to you all whether our interests in him don't seem to be justified — barring the present events —

for there ain't an abler little gentleman, nor a clearer head, on the two divisions than young Shackston. That 's the Mrs. Shackston in him.

"I tell you it gives me feelings when I think of that boy coming over on the mail, like he is this morning — that 's the old Shackston in him — and I 'm mighty mixed in them feelings about Summer's smell-dogs, tracking him up this way, stealthy and deceitful like, 'stead of giving folks that know about these things a chance to say a decent word to him, all quiet, and wean him from these Shackston ways that 's likely only cropped out temporary, same as rash onto a baby.

"But, who 'd a-guessed he was needing help?" the old man asked, in more evident distress than any of the water tank gathering had ever before detected in his usually calm contentment.

The mournful chime of the oncoming mail quavered down through the silence which followed, and the dark bulk of her rolled through the western pass and glided steadily down the steep incline to the station.

The group at the tank, still silent, transferred itself to a vantage-point along the little plat of grass before the station entrance, but when the clean-featured young man who stepped off the smoker ahead of Summer swung his heavy, leaden foot along the platform, his eyes did not lift to the friendly faces which were there to greet him.

Summer, whose daily creed and whose perhaps necessary calling admonished him only that a thief is a thief, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," seemed to mistake the murmur which ran through the group, and he thrust the prisoner more hurriedly into the eating-house door.

Muller was backing down upon the train with his engine when the shamed face of the young man reappeared, coming from the dining-room, but the others still lingered with Enderby along the platform.

When Summer and the young man again came abreast of Enderby the old man stepped forward, extending his hand, and the group, with one impulse, closed slowly in about them.

" Steady there! " said Summer, with a metallic ring in his voice which promised quick action, as his hand leaped to the butt of his revolver.

" Steady enough," replied Enderby, calmly, but with something of a definite quality in his voice that held no sound of battle. " I want a word with the boy, all open and free," said he, and proceeded to have it without awaiting a question of consent.

" Stand up like the man that you were — and the man that you are! You have friends here. And when it 's over, why, come back. Don't forget that, boy! Come back! And I 'm thinking it won't be long.

" That 's all. Good-bye! "

" Good-bye! " echoed the group as it opened the way, and the young man dragged his leaden boot up the steps of the car.

Turning upon the car platform, he looked down upon them with the first smile that had shown upon his face. Then his jaw tightened, showing the real strength of him, and he said:

" Good-bye, Pap! Good-bye, boys! I 'll come."

" Ho, Enderby! " called Muller's rumbling voice from the gangway of the engine, where he was huddled down, reading an order.

" According to this," said he, handing the order to Enderby, " we are heading in at Sweetwater, to let the general manager's special go by. He 's likely making for the Harmony mines, for a side trip.

"You 'll be laying over and you 'll pull him up there, I suppose. There 's no other engine free. Now, say," and Muller's voice took on a deeper rumble, which in a weaker man might have been merely a tremble of intensity, "You just tell Sharer the inside of this mere off-shoot theory of yours, same as you told it at the tank — will you?

"You just tell him what that Mrs. Shackston was like and about her singing to the boy that night. He 's a judge of good stock, and has young ones of his own.

"Ask him to take a look at young Shackston, and if that boy is n't back here on his job, as soon as the good of the service will allow, you don't need to count my guess any more — not *ever*," he added by way of emphasis, as he reached for the order and straightened up upon the engine deck, ponderously.

"I 'll sure do it!" nodded Enderby, vigorously, as he turned back toward the waiting group, and those who stood nearest where he passed on to the roundhouse heard him say, to none of them in particular:

"It seems almost providential!"

Meanwhile, the mail train had been slipping away from the depot, and the fierce cannonade of exhausts from the engine dragging upward at an unusual pace was relieving the feelings of Muller, although its echoing roar did not encourage further conversation at the station.

That evening, while the bitter truth of his condition was searing the soul of Shackston in the prison of distant Alta Vista, Enderby, about to depart upon the return trip from the mines, stood beside his engine in Harmony Gulch talking earnestly with the general manager.

"Yes," the general manager was saying, "I know Shackston and have been observing him, for some years, as a promising man. But what can be said for a thief, Enderby, a man who would steal from a train in his charge?"

Enderby, strong in the unfailing friendship of many years' acquaintance with Sharer, replied:

"Nothing, in the common run of such doings, I reckon, but for this boy, Shackston, it can be said that, until now, ne'er spot nor blemish is there on his record. And more than that."

Following which he unfolded the hunger-bitten tale of the lonely little woman of the Tonto country and the tragic way in which the construction camp, and finally the railroad, fell heir to the boy, Shackston.

"This latter doing is not the boy's self, I hold. It's a mere flash in the pan of his making!

"I ask you, Mr. Sharer, could you give him another tryout? He will never fall again!"

"Enderby, you have enlisted my sympathy where my judgment rebels. No," Sharer quickly corrected, "rather, where my duty appears to conflict. I see no way to maintain the discipline without having Shackston stand his trial and abide by the result."

"I am sorry," said Enderby, turning sadly toward the engine step. "I had hopes —"

"I would say this, however," interrupted Sharer, gently laying his arm across the shoulders of his stripling son, who approached from the car. "If the court at Alta Vista could be made to see the matter as you have shown it, I should be willing to consider Shackston's case very carefully, afterward. Good-night, Enderby!"

"Good-night!" replied Enderby, as he grasped Sharer's extended hand, and climbed upon the engine, flushed with a revulsion of hope that had fled.

Late in the forenoon of one of the many bitter long days which had dragged their slow length away since Shackston was imprisoned, Enderby alighted from the smoker of Muller's fast mail at Alta Vista, and made his way strongly up the long steep street to the courthouse and prison that huddled under the cliff.

He threaded his way among the patient cow-ponies that stood, numerously, with drooping heads and trailing bridle-reins, outside the doors, and entering the crowded little court-room, seated himself inside the railed enclosure of the bar, beside the surprised Shackston.

"Leave it to me, boy!" was all that passed in whispered greeting, as their hands closed in a strong clasp.

The walls of the little territorial court-room have listened to many a strange story and looked down upon many a stolid, many a tragic scene, and among its numerous records, the clear, brief record of the trial of Shackston stands not unique or alone in its plain wisdom.

"Commonwealth against Shackston!" called the court clerk, even while Enderby whispered his brief admonition. "Royal Shackston to the bar!"

The twelve men of the jury were already drawn and seated when Enderby arrived, and in it were weather-tanned men grown old and full of the wisdom that comes of the high places of the open. A garish, round window of stained glass, high up in the eastern gable, was pouring its vari-colored light upon them and playing grotesquely with their dust-stained faces and garments, for which there had remained no time for refreshment after their long ride in answer to the summons of the court. Standing before them, Shackston listened to the reading of an indictment which, in the otherwise silent room, seemed to his unaccustomed ears to be swiftly sinking him to the blackest depths of an infamy he had never known.

"What say you? Guilty or not guilty?" came the question, at the last.

Speechless and downcast, he stood for a moment, and the court-room became deathly in its silence.

"Have you a lawyer?" spoke the judge, methodically. "You are entitled to plead 'Guilty,' 'Not guilty,' or to enter no plea at all. Who is your lawyer?"

"I will make no plea," said Shackston slowly. "I have no lawyer. I have only a friend who knows my case: Mark Enderby. Could I be allowed to stand by what he can do for me?"

The venerable judge, wise in the annals of the high country long before the railroad had entered there, studying Enderby's honest, upturned face replied:

"The court sees no objection, if the commonwealth consents."

And thus, the ambitious young prosecutor, seeing probable easy victory ahead, and prestige growing out of a railroad conviction, smilingly assented and proceeded with his arraignment. By Summer and his men the offence was proven, and for Shackston there were no witnesses. The brilliant peroration of the young prosecutor bristled and stabbed with flights of invective against the betrayal of a trust, breaking and entering, larceny, felony, while Enderby, searching the faces of the jurymen, saw no answering light of enthusiasm there and his heart beat high with hope.

It was finished, shortly, and Enderby, at a nod from the judge, arose.

"If this boy will waive his right to be present, as he 's set aside his right to a lawyer, naming me instead, I 'm minded to say a little to these men here," nodding toward the jury, "which it ain't needful that the boy should hear," announced Enderby firmly.

When Shackston had been withdrawn from the room, Enderby turned toward the jury and in that moment forgot the tense, silent audience, the lawyers, the court; all, except the twelve men gazing directly at him, and they seemed as familiar and friendly as one of the tank bench gatherings at Villa Rica.

In the midst of them sat a white-haired veteran of the mountains upon whose snowy head and beard the little gable window was pouring a shaft of golden sunlight that seemed to centre him among his fellows like a snow-capped peak in the morning light of the plains.

Before him, Enderby seated himself upon the chair which he supplied to himself, in unconscious disregard of the ways of courts.

"You have heard," he began without prelude. "The boy don't deny it, but what did he take?

"Little, high-smelling things to eat! And the wealth of a fast freight to the coast laying all around his feet, once he 's made the mistake of going into a car where he has no business!

"Things to eat!" he repeated, "with a heaping plenty of grub already in his way-car and at both ends of the division, which rightly belongs to him, same as we all have! Why did he?

"Now I'm a-going to tell you boys something," said Enderby, in the words of his earlier announcement at Villa Rica tank, and he was proceeding with the story of Shackston.

"Oh, your honor, we must object!" said the prosecutor. "It is not in the evidence. And to what end is it told?"

"To prove the character of the boy!" said Enderby, quietly, arising and standing before the court.

"Maybe as well to swear me, if that will make it better evidence, for what I'm holding is that this boy is his mother's son, body and soul, and that what he's lately done ain't no more to the man he'll be than measles are, when they are done and gone!"

"You may proceed," said the judge, and Enderby resumed his seat before the jury.

When the tale was told and Enderby had made clear his theory of unnatural hunger at the smell of car-stores; of the bitter, starved existence of parents and the stray outcrop of a nomad father's trait in a clean and manly son, tears had furrowed the dust upon the cheeks of the white-haired juror and were sparkling, unnoticed by him, upon his sun-shot beard.

"What do you all think of this business?" said Enderby's calm voice, as he picked up his chair, and then withdrew to a place beside Shackston's empty seat.

"The commonwealth closes!" said the young prosecutor, in subdued accents, as his eyes hastily ran over the faces of the jury.

"Bring in the defendant!" said the judge.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said he, when Shackston had resumed his place at the bar, "you cannot do otherwise than to find this defendant guilty, under the evidence produced.

But, the court will consider any recommendation that the jury may wish to make."

"Guilty!" said the white-haired juror, arising after a short conference. "The jury recommends that the boy be paroled in the custody of his lawyer!"

"The boy is paroled, in the custody of his lawyer, Mark Enderby," echoed the judge while his austere old face softened almost to a smile and his eyes lingered for a time upon Enderby and Shackston.

And that is what made it possible for Sharer to consider Shackston's case very carefully; and for Shackston, now that those bitter days are long gone, to hold his honored place among the best of men — which is to say, he is busy and happy among the older boys of Villa Rica.

CHAPTER XIII

JOHNNIE

FOR seven years, John Parry wrought the effort of his brilliant mind and great strength into the physical welfare of railroads in Chicago, and into the making of permanent ways upon the broad levels of Kansas and the near uplands westward. Meanwhile, out of the fulness of his uncalculating love for his fellows, he had named every man brother and made light of the oft-times heavy burden of the day.

Seven busy, happy years they were, in the flush of his prime manhood, and then a stealthy blight began showing in his big, sunny face and clutching at his sturdy heart. The red flush of his strength receded and left him wan-faced, with the far gaze that grows in the eyes of a strong man gone weak in the menace of the white death.

The time came when encroaching weakness became greater than the call of the tracks which he had laid and maintained; greater than the deep drumming of the bridges he had built, the plaint of the turbulent streams which he had conquered and restrained. He was no longer able to go strongly afield when the need arose, and the cross-hairs of the transit and the slender lines of office drawings, alike, ran dim and blurred before his smiling, straining eyes. It seemed evident to all but him that he must go higher in search of relief, or pass out swiftly and for all from the fierce, changing, weather-moods of the low country.

From the multitude of his duties as stalwart leader of the local engineer corps the heaviest portions were lifted, one by one, until, almost unawares, men had come to speak of him in a subdued but still loyal way as "Johnnie"— he who had so long and so well set the pace for the corps. And he, likewise but half aware of the true significance of it all, had tacitly accepted the modest re-christening, which had grown out of heartfelt pity for his weakness.

He read the whole truth, at last, in the tolerant eyes of those around him; or, at least, far more of it than he had ever admitted to the road surgeon, whose blunt admonitions to let go and retreat for a time to the mountains had thus far brought forth only the brave echo of a former resonant laugh, while he stayed and labored on, according to his fitful strength.

But now, he yielded to the inevitable. Believing it best for them, he prevailed upon his pleading wife to return, temporarily, to Chicago, with their two chubby boys. Then, he bade a bravely smiling farewell to the assembled engineer corps, and following his travel-worn trunks into the all-receiving maw of the Overland Express, departed, alone, for the high country, wherein Balceta was then the Alpha and Omega of the farther railroad doings, and, indeed, for many another in case like his, had been the end of all things earthly.

Yet, there were those who had vanquished, at even closer and more deadly holds, the foe that now beset him and who had come back out of the high country, if not hale men and hearty, yet very good men. So, with a stoop in his big body, the more pathetic because he sought so hard to straighten himself against it, and a smile in his heart which not even the apathy of the plague could dim wholly from his face; hoping and not alone in that hope, he went out to battle for life in the mountains — and to be canonized as the only living saint that Balceta, the engineer corps, or perhaps any one else, has ever known; but that statement is somewhat ahead of the event.

When Johnnie stepped, none too strongly, from the express at Balceta, Stoner, principal assistant engineer of the mountain divisions, was there with his strong, brown hand extended. As his great grip closed gently upon Johnnie's hand he said quite simply:

"Howdy, old man! Glad to see you. Come over to my house until you get settled. But, first, come across the track here and shake hands with Mark Enderby. Villa Rica man. He 's wholesome."

The rest of Balceta, in the stereotyped expression of bluff kindness which long familiarity with such arrivals had bred, merely said aside:

"Who 's the new 'lunger' with Stoner?"

"Enderby," said Stoner, when they had reached the place where Mark was peering and stooping beside his engine, "shake hands with Johnnie Parry. Guess you never knew him, but you will and he 's all right — or will be, soon. He 's going to work with us out here, a while. Shake, Parry. Mark 's a good bit of gay young scamp, with an engine. Raises thunder with my bridges and things, but he 'll do."

Enderby straightened, with a flushed smile, and searched Parry's amused face for a moment, while he wiped his hands upon a bit of cotton waste.

"No," he said as he grasped Parry's hand, "I never knew him, but I am very glad to know you, now, Mr. Parry."

"And I the same," replied Parry, while his eyes sobered into intent study of Enderby's face, "except that I believe I already know you, in a way. Did you once run out of Chicago?"

"I did," said Enderby, "for a year or two, while my daughter was at school, near there."

"I thought so!" replied Parry. "You pulled me upon the great trip of my life — my wedding trip. And now, I am here to have you men and your mountains help me to pull myself back upon another journey, if you will, back to the solid ground of health that has been trying to play the deserter."

When the meeting was briefly through with, and the stirring scene of that bright morning of long ago in the arch of the great hood of the train-shed in Chicago had been fully recalled and made sure in its relations to them both, Parry went his way with Stoner, the glad grip of Enderby's hand again tingling through his own, and Enderby's cheering words ringing in his ears:

"We 'll pull you back, never fear! This high country likes the right kind of a fighter. You 're that! Come up to Villa Rica, when you can. The boys will welcome you like a brother. *Adios*, till I see you."

Used as he was to the far goings and the frequent solitudes of an engineer's life in the field, now, in his weakness, the boundless emptiness of the then dormant surrounding barrens, the profound silence of the mountains, and even the impersonal, all-pervading blue of the sky made him feel, at times, very much alone in the little adobe house where he was finally quartered, and in the first days of his exile he could almost have cried out, "I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind."

Superior to that, however, was the persistent, unfailing uplift of the high country, the cheer of unflagging hope, and, soon the fibres of returning strength were stirring at his heart, day by day. Thus, some months slipped away after his coming to Balceta and the little town had come to love him with a sort of civic pride. The state of his health had become a recognized matter of public concern, and as his strength slowly but visibly grew, his comings and goings upon the crude highways and into the fastnesses of the rugged watershed which lies about Balceta were events of unfailing local interest.

This, because no yawning earthen vessel in the darkened interior of a hunger-smitten adobe long remained empty of corn or *frijoles*, once the pressing need was made known to him by the trustful, aged *casa madre;* and because not only these simple, long-suffering house-mothers but also the strong and active rank and file of Balceta like to see all men strong, and they rejoice openly in the winning fight of a man who makes his last stand for life in their mountains.

There was another reason for Johnnie's popularity, dimmer and more impersonal than these others, but very real and near to the heart of Balceta. It was known that, in pursuance of Stoner's pet idea, long postponed of execution, with that deferred hope which sickens the heart, big, smiling, patient Johnnie had at last been assigned to survey the watershed that lies roundabout the town, and to locate a source of permanent water supply which should relieve the well-nigh constant summer need and also guard against the coming of an evil day of extreme drought, which Stoner had long foreseen, wherein Balceta might come to very sore straits.

Thus, while Johnnie and his small corps of assistants scouted the peaks and draws for days at a stretch in the open, and Stoner and he, between whiles, wrangled in the office, in blunt good nature, over the field notes and water prospects, the springtime of the year of his rejuvenation opened and the maps and plattings were well along. With them was a wealth of figures which proved that the greatest flow from melting snows and summer rains was lost to Balceta, somewhere between the heights and the meagre summer flow of the river. Therefore, Johnnie was frequently found saying:

"Drill for it, Stoner, drill! Here is the place," he would add, at the end of many of their conferences, indicating upon the map a spot just above the edge of the town. "The uplift is there. The whole dip of rock from the heights is right. The water is there, and has been for ages!

"It lies deep, but full and free, and there is a thousand-foot head to lift it, if there is an ounce. I have verified it, with all but the water. We can get it. Drill!"

And while Stoner became convinced that the location was right, and wrote persistently for a special appropriation, which somehow did not come, the May rains fell, the new amber-green of the high country was over all the valley and upon the *mesas,* and the little river ran fat with waters between its narrow banks.

Toward the end of May, the regular afternoon showers ceased suddenly. June ran its course without rain, except for a stray gust or two, the great sparkling drops of which sank deep into the tall parching grasses, or struck the dry earth in widely scattered puffs of dust, and left the river shrinking rapidly between its browning banks.

July, August, and September ran their parched and blistering length while the sharp rays of the brazen sun speared the river from its rocky, blackened bed and seared a darker tinge upon the thick-standing dwarf pines which crowded down closely upon the town where the mountain crouched at its back. The wide ranges which stretch away beyond the river had, long since, turned from green to gray and from gray to russet, and over it all the air lay still as sleep, while Stoner, straining under the responsibility of Balceta's crying need, reiterated his request to headquarters for drillers and apparatus, or for money and permission to do the work of well-sinking with his own meagre force. But in those years improvement went slowly and men and money were at a premium.

So Johnnie, within the cool of adobe walls at altitude, with his field work done, rested from his wandering upon the watershed and elaborated his profiles and sections, while Stoner fumed and hauled water to Balceta, as best he might, from the far Rio Grande. The river-bed was dotted with thirst-killed cattle, among which others staggered, thrusting their swollen and bleeding tongues into the rare moist spots until they fell dead among their fellows; and along Stoner's water trains seasoned veterans of road-building, who had seen the desert at its worst, were pacing on guard, rifle in hand, with a look that closely resembled terror in their weather-tanned faces. Balceta was living almost by the will of Stoner and any who filled a pail or *olla* at the tank-trains had first to satisfy the guards that the order from Stoner was genuine.

Stoner bore it like a man of bronze, until, while looking at the map of the watershed upon which Johnnie was delineating the underground water supply as he believed it existed, the thing became a reality in Stoner's mind and he turned abruptly from the maps with an upward sweep of his hands above his head, as though to brush himself clear of the entangling rounds of routine which had so long delayed the project, and made his way at once to the bridge-timber yard.

That night and the following day things of large import went forward at a feverish pace in the bridge yard and the shops, and during the whole of the next night the flare of torches cut the darkness, on the hillside at the edge of the town, upon the knoll that was marked with a star upon Johnnie's field plat.

To every offer of help from Johnnie, Stoner replied savagely:

"Keep off! Rest up! Don't try to hitch in, just now, and lose all you have gained in strength. Your turn may come later, in a pinch."

The following morning's light revealed a tall, primitive derrick and drill standing in place, and when the first puff of steam barked from the portable engine, Stoner, turning to Johnnie, who had appeared with the sun, said:

"Drill!"

Then he stretched his weary length under a scrub pine upon the mountain-side and slept as one dead, until the sun was high.

Throughout the day, the heavy drill clanked its battering blows upon the cap-rock and sank slowly into the flinty depths. At night, Stoner resumed command and gave it up again to Johnnie in the morning. And so the fierce pounding, drilling, sheathing went on for the week; a score of feet down through the cap-rock, twice that in a welcome soft-fault, and then the drill entered the long drive in the lime-rock, and thus far the maps were justified and Johnnie rejoiced in secret, while Stoner stood his recurring guard and only once asked:

"How much deeper, Johnnie? To the limit of your drawing, think?"

"Another length. Hold fast, and drill!" was all that Johnnie answered as he gave up his watch at the derrick and turned downward to the town.

The sun of the Sunday morning which followed rose red and fiery over the eastern *mesa* and showed the lower levels in a hazy film of blue which was foreign to the clear, rare height of Balceta. The perishing cattle sniffed the dry air with cracked and bleeding nostrils and came staggering with terror-stricken eyes toward the town and the tracks, lolling their tongues and lapping in agony at even the stray waft of vapor from a passing engine.

Brief, clear, and deadly was the message which Stoner laid in the hands of Johnnie at the well that was to be, and he stared at him with red, sleepless eyes as he read it:

"Extra Number 984 ditched and turned over at Arroyo. Five hours to clear track. The grass is fired and a tongue is running up Mont el Rey towards Balceta."

"That 's my water train, Johnnie! I can't send up water enough to run this drill engine past noon!"

"Send what you can. We will drill until noon!" replied Johnnie. "We are close to the depth and we may drive it to the finish before it is too late."

"Three miles out, and burning in this drought!" replied Stoner. "It 's all up with Balceta if the fire comes into the pines!"

The haze thickened to a film and the film grew to a stifling pall of pungent, acrid smoke as the morning advanced, and all of thirst-parched Balceta which was not out to fight the advance of the fire gathered in stupefied terror among its hurriedly packed belongings along the tracks and waited the return of the wreck-train to deliver it from the worst, if the fire should hem it in. And Johnnie, long over-tried, with a return of the pallor which had sent him to the mountains, gave his orders in a weakened voice, but stayed by the derrick and drilled.

Nine, ten, eleven o'clock; the incessant pounding of the drill went on and the smoke upon the mountain-side thickened until the sun was shut out and Johnnie and his men were breathing with difficulty through wetted cloths dipped grudgingly in the well-nigh empty water casks at the boiler. A line of fire crept around the hip of the mountain, and in its steady advance upon the town, was glowing red through the smoke, below the rise upon which stood the derrick at the well.

"We will have to give it up and go!" said Stoner as he came up from his labors at back-firing the grass beyond the dry river-bed in the valley.

"Not until we have to draw the fire under the boiler, Stoner! We are close to the end now, and it will be big water or nothing within this hour; that, or my reckoning is wrong and my year's work as worthless as a dead coyote!"

"Clank! clank! clank!" the drill struck its accompaniment, as they reasoned the chances; and then came the end, quite suddenly.

Twice as they stood watching it, the heavy shaft of steel rose to the draw of the cable and delivered its dull-sounding blow deep in the rock. A third time, it rose and fell; and rose no more. With a grinding crash, it broke from its moorings in the derrick and went hissing and grating down into the depths of steel casing in the well, and the derrick, shaken free of its hastily constructed supports, slipped clear of the rock and toppled, crashing, down the hillside.

From the depths of the casing came a gurgling, muffled roar and then a crackling, hissing column of blue-white water shot upward and mounted into the pall of smoke until its top was quickly lost to sight. Solid-looking and pure as a shaft of polished steel, it sprung from the ample mouth of the casing and fell drenching back in a blessed deluge upon the scattered drillers on the hillside and rushed away down the glare of rocks to hunt its way through the neck of smoking pines and on through the dry arroyo in the heart of the town, down, at last, to the gaping river-channel.

Then fickle Dame Nature, the friend of him who wins, for the first time smiled upon the heart-breaking battle and sent a waft of cool north wind from the upper heights. It rolled the pall of smoke from off Balceta, for a moment, and the sun's bright rays fell upon the crest of water tumbling and waving in a great feathery plume of white, a hundred feet above the rock from which it spouted.

To those below in the town, who stood listening in added terror to the new sound, it showed only for a moment and then, as the arc of mist which trailed from the tumbling crest of water flung the glories of a miniature rainbow to the breeze, the smoke-pall closed in upon it and hid the glad sight from their view.

It was enough, however, to turn them mad with joy, and mingled with the hoarser shouts from the tracks and the well, there arose the soft treble of the native folk and the shrilling of their children, sweet and reverent, even out of the depths of their great terror.

"*En el nombre de Dios! Los aguas pintado!*" it rang, softly but strong, above the motley din of shouting men and lowing, water-mad cattle. And then, when the north wind finally prevailed, and the curtain of smoke rolled off the mountain-side and out of the valley, it revealed the wasted brown bodies of men, women, and children rolling and revelling in the clear, cool water that rushed down the long arroyo to the river.

Soon they came straggling, shouting, upward to the spouting well, where Stoner sat wiping the dripping mist from Johnnie's unconscious face and trying in vain to chafe the color back to his nerveless hands. Then their rejoicing quickly sank to a murmur of pity and awe, while they stood with bared heads until he was borne, limp and unheeding, down to the town.

In the harnessing of the well, the drowning out of the nearest fire-lines, and the further battle for the town's sake that day, Stoner had little part and Johnnie none whatever, but the work was done victoriously. Balceta withstood its great trial and the rains that rode in on the wind from the north soon made the good work complete.

It was many days before Johnnie firmly caught back his hold on life, but, after that, his gain was so rapid that Stoner declared the final creosoting of the tense day of smoke and tribulations was the one thing needed to complete Johnnie's recovery.

" Same as a good piece of bridge timber, now, you will be fire and weather proof! " he would sometimes conclude, while badgering him back to life, in the weeks that followed.

And Johnnie, with the color mounting to his face, strong and stronger each day, would laughingly respond, with something of his old gayety:

" I believe you are right, Stoner! "

There was a time though, just at first, when the grateful and awed native Balcetans so little expected ever again to greet him in the flesh that they set reverently about his enrollment among the blessed of the world beyond.

"Come up to the well with me," said Stoner, in one of the first days in which Johnnie was again fit to go abroad in the town.

"Looks good, don't it?" he said, when they had come to the base of the granite cliff where a small fountain fell sparkling back into a natural bowl of the red rock and the well sent its greater wealth of water through a swelling main stretching down into the town.

"What do you think of this, *San Juan?*" he supplemented, gently turning Johnnie about, to face the towering wall of rock.

"*En el nombre de Dios Todopoderoso y San Juan de la Aguas Pintado.*"

Parry read in astonishment, from the clear chiselling of script cut into the face of the rock at shoulder height.

And below it, in the bold, clean-cut lettering with which Stoner's mason gang was accustomed to cut in its bridge dates:

"*In the name of Almighty God: and Saint John of the Painted Waters.*"

"Oh that will hardly do, Stoner!" exclaimed Balceta's modest saint, with a flush of confusion mixed with a pride that was just.

"It 's got to do!" parried Stoner. "They thought you were billed out, for certain; that you were gone, in fact, when they cut it. It expresses their belief in God. If I changed it, they 'd pull me apart. And I thought it was fit to put into 'United States,' when I found it there one morning," he concluded, with a quizzical look into his companion's face, more earnest than teasing.

Johnnie left it, at that, and in due time went back, for a while, to his own upon the plains, laughing his own good laugh in season, and strong in his rebuilded strength. The story of the painted waters went down from the mountain before him, and while no one then felt impelled, for the one-time reason, to call him "Johnnie" in his big strength of body and purpose, yet later, when the battle had again been hard and the river waters had fought fiercely before yielding, or when the camp-fire burned low in still nights upon the field, there were those who liked to speak of him as "Saint John," and, occasionally, "Johnnie," but always with a note of manful regard.

When he chanced to overhear, he smiled a victorious sort of smile which lighted up his face, quite as of old; and, undisturbed, he seemed neither depressed nor elated by the mixed memories which those names must have stirred.

The mountains, however, once they have set the seal of their approval upon a man, give him up reluctantly. They seem, animately, to hate to extinction one who hates or fears them, but of John Parry, who had befriended them and whom they had befriended, they were destined, presently, to see more.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BIRTH OF THE FLYER

"FASTER than Seventeen's time? Ten cars? There 's nothing on wheels can do it!" declared Dodson with fine assurance that seemed bristling with anger.

That was merely seeming, however. He was only very earnest, not angry. His eyes were fastened fiercely upon the face of McPeltrie who having had his say about the rumored new time-card, sat calmly returning the gaze of Dodson from the other end of the tank bench at the roundhouse.

"Not through El Soledad Canyon; and not over these two divisions, complete. You know it!" Dodson added with even greater emphasis and arose with a jerk from his place upon the bench.

He crushed in his hand the old and well thumbed official time-table from which he had supported his contention, and with it proceeded noisily to beat imaginary dust from his freshly donned overalls.

Coming from Dodson, who seldom refused a reasonable chance to go, and never accepted an unnecessary hazard, these assertions carried weight with Villa Rica men. Therefore, something more than the moment of silence which was likely to follow the earnest expression of any accredited man's opinion at the tank passed before even Enderby felt called upon to speak.

"Maybe not on wheels, just yet, but like as not she 's about ready for them now," said Enderby.

He turned his kindly, quizzical eyes upward to where Dodson's face loomed big against the rising sun above the rim of the crater.

"Dinwiddy figures that she will soon be out of the shops, back East. The first engine, that is, and there 's to be more of them following right along, to help her protect the fast runs when the new card is out."

At the sound of Enderby's measured voice, Dodson's eyes had instantly shifted from the set jaw of McPeltrie to the old man's smiling eyes, and thus shifting, had worked a wondrous change in Dodson's look of earnest defiance. The blaze died out of his eyes and softened to a twinkling glow, while his voice took on a quality of respectful attention not wholly free from anxiety.

"Then you think she will cut it, Pap?" he questioned. "It 's some big!"

"Forty-two miles an hour, change engines, make water-stops, and average up one side and down the other, is some big over this division, with that load," conceded Enderby gravely. "But that 's what the new time-card will set it up to, they say, and the new engine and her kind will hold it there.

"That boy in there put his soul into the drawings, long enough before they ever got to Balceta for approval, or to the shops back East to wrangle over and work by.

"'T ain't saying they don't know engines, back East. They do. But he knows the kinks and high spots on both of these divisions like he knows his own face for shaving, and that 's what counts at the finish.

"He made this coming type of engine, you may as well say, and still he 's to me just the same plain-minded little fellow that we picked up out of the Apache raid, years ago, in the Tonto country.

" He showed me some of the drawings one day — got so wrapped up, like, that he figured the whole strength of the engine for me, right there on the table, before he ever remembered that I maybe could n't eat all the crust of his mathematical pie. But, I reckon I got the filling of it, and the point is that she will pull them.

" And I 'll tell you this, boys. If that train 's to be only half as fine as they tell him and he tells me, I 'd rather put it through on time over this division, if it was only for once, than to be a rear admiral in the navy! Point is, he says she 's going to pull them, and this is the division that tells. The boy knows and he says she will do it," he reiterated proudly.

" Meaning Dinwiddy? " smiled " Rock-a-by " Johnson. Enderby nodded in quick assent.

" Well, Dinwiddy 's some sizable of a boy, and what he says most generally goes, but," said Johnson, with a dubious shake of the head, " I 'm leaning some strong towards Dodson's views, Pap. It 's a heap big job to put ten cars through El Soledad faster than Seventeen's time!

" You see, you can't always tell about these sharps that do their figuring on the table — meaning nothing small towards Dinwiddy," he hastily added, as a brighter glint of light leaped into the eyes of Enderby. " He 's an all-right master mechanic, but that don't wipe out the fact that when us fellows are figuring, we have to do most of it in the cab, with the throttle open and other people coming a-plenty.

" Now, you fellows all remember that 743 engine that I was running on ' One ' and ' Two,' when the experts came out from headquarters and put the thimble-rigging on her. She would n't go nowheres. You know it!

"Well, they got a lot of them little Christmas cards off of her, supposed to show the workings of her internals, and the youngest goslin' in the bunch swells up at me like a blowin' adder, when I touch him on the back and confide to him at Balceta that the engine ain't worth stall room.

"'Why,' he says, 'Mr. Johnson —'"

"Wau-g-h!" jeered a chorus of not unfriendly voices, trailing off into the clear utterance of McPeltrie. "Play ball, Johnson!"

"Yes, he did!" protested Johnson savagely. "That 's exactly what he says! You wait till I get through, will you?

"'Why, Mr. Johnson,' the young fellow says, 'those cards are *ideal!*'

"Harper, the boss of the bunch, was busy somewheres else and did n't hear it, so I never did find out exactly what he thought.

"'Meaning she 's an all-right engine?' I says.

"'Certainly,' was what the young fellow says then, and I climbed aboard, quick, and moseyed her up to the roundhouse to keep from insulting him. Why, we 'd just come in fifteen minutes late with 'One,' then, and I 'd been punished a sight by that engine hanging back on the schedule, right along. His opinion was about as welcome as lizards.

"But I got hunk, all right, after we got back. I met Harper just as he 's coming out of the eating-house, right here in Villa Rica, and I says to him:

"'Mr. Harper, I understand that the cards you are getting off of that 743 are called ideal. Now, I 've run that engine a sight and she ain't worth three whoops up the hollow, neither pulling nor drifting. But that 's not what I wanted to ask you.

"'What I wanted to ask is this: If the cards are ideal, off of that 743, that ain't worth nothing as an engine, and I can take the 747 and make her run rings around the 743, and likewise, make the 747 climb a tree and do it easy; why then, if you were to take some cards off of the 747, what in blazes would *they* be?'

"That 's what I asked him," concluded Johnson with deep satisfaction. "So you see, you can't always tell about these fellows figuring in advance!"

"But what did Harper say?" puffed Muller contentedly from the bench.

"Oh, he did n't say much," answered Johnson airily. "He just said: 'I don't know, Johnson. You started with a wrong hypothesis.'

"'Well,' I says, 'I never had no fault found with my way of starting nor stopping,' and let it go at that, seeing that he owned up he did n't know."

For Johnson's sake, they weighed it all, solemnly, before Dodson handed down an opinion that seemed to meet the common need.

"That 743 was a sure-enough camel," he said, "but I don't see that you 've proved anything against Dinwiddy or Pap — nor the new engine that 's coming."

"I expect the point was in that 'hypothesis' of Harper's, if you had drawn him out a little farther, Johnson," chuckled Muller, with a manner that savored of certainty.

"That 's whatever!" laughed Dodson. "He did n't make much useless talk, for common, as long as he was around me. And he knowed just about where to let go of ideals.

"But that 's not saying that Pap's seniority don't give him first whirl at the new Flyer! You say what you want, Pap, and we 're with you to a finish for that first run, when she shows up here. There won't be anything hanging beyond the switch against you that night, you can bet. You get a clear board and a clear track, as far as we can make it, and anything else you say. Eh, boys?"

"You know it!" they chorused variously.

"Yes, I know it, boys, and much obliged," the old man replied, a flush of pleasure mounting supreme over the anxious look that had latterly grown upon his face. "It 's about the same as Dinwiddy said when we talked it over, some little while back, and I told him all I needed was a clear track and lend me McPeltrie off of Dodson's run, for the first try."

"Hoo-ray for you, Pap!" whispered Dodson with a loud mock effort at secrecy, stooping suddenly until his face swung close to that of Enderby. "And if he happened to fall down, for once, I 'd fire for you myself, if I could get to you.

"You 'll be so puffed up now that there 'll be no living on the engine with you," he concluded as he reached for McPeltrie, and hauling him off the bench, summarily broke up the morning gathering by marching him laughing away into the smoky mysteries of the roundhouse.

Other days saw other councils at the tank bench, and meanwhile, the first sheets of the new time-card were being carefully pencilled, debated with Bunnel, the despatcher, and pencilled anew. Elsewhere, the making of the Flyer was going swiftly on.

Long since, in the dim arcades of the Canadian woods, where the wintry sunshine glistened upon fields of snow and lightened the gloom of vast aisles of the forest; where the icy waters of Huron lay still along their frozen shores, secure from the grasp of the wind of the north, the silence had been broken.

The ringing blows of the axe and the cries of the woodsmen, the musical clink of frosty chains, the swish of the keen biting saw and, now and again, the boom of falling trees, had told of their last stand against the white man's advance. Here, a towering pine and there a spreading maple; yonder, a sylph-like birch and again a sturdy oak, had shivered, swayed, and crashed down among its fellows.

Along Superior's northern shore, the earth had bared its riven side and given up a rib of steel from which to fashion a mighty helpmeet — a locomotive and its train. And, that she might be swift and sure and seemly, men had delved deep, hither and yon in the earth, like giant moles far beneath the cap-rock, in the heart of tawny copper, white silver, tin, and even yellow gold.

The blue waters of Campeche's gulf had rippled and swelled and idly smiled upon their tropic shores, and then borne away upon their swelling tides to far Mobile, spicy columns of mahogany and cedar and given them up at the call of the hurrying northland.

California's majestic slopes had given of their fir and redwood. New Zealand had sent its teakwood and amber-clear resins, China and Japan their sheening silks, the Mississippi delta its bolls of snowy cotton, Georgia its golden pine, and from the green spots of desert and mountains had come bales of richest wools.

By the patient tread of men and beasts, by swelling tides, by rail and stream, these things had, long since, merged toward a centre where the making of the Flyer was at hand.

THE BIRTH OF THE FLYER

Along the Allegheny's turbid flood, bursting stars of steel in the making had shot upward through the darkness of a hundred nights while ores were fused and cast. A host of sinewy hands and nimble feet, of clear brains and stanch hearts, had guided, evaded, rolled, beaten out the nobler forms of tube and bar and plate of steel.

There too, by the rushing river, great heaps of whitened sand had run red with heat, then white again and clear as crystal into wells and plates of perfect glass.

Beyond the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies, near the low shores of Lake Michigan, the cotton and the wools, the steel and wood, the red-bronze and glass and copal-resins and silks were growing under deft hands and watchful eyes, into compact palaces wherein men might laugh in their strength or safely languish in their weakness, and, thus laughing or repining, speed swiftly upon their various ways, setting the old-time distance at easy naught.

One by one, there grew upon the tracks of that teeming place the units of a train of royal blue. Redolent of the bitter good tang of oak they grew, sweet with the spice of mahogany and redwood and pine, sibilant with the whisper of silks, and stanch as the giant tree-boles and rocks from which they sprang. And, when they had all crept forth under a smiling sky and the perfect line was done, they gave back to the sun, ray for ray, from their shining coats of gold and bronze and lacquer and glass, like beads of darkened amethyst upon a thread of silver.

And near to where the Schuylkill stains the Delaware a deeper hue, the pungent steams of burning core-sands were rising under the hands of men who wrought everyday wonders in the Old Red City. Beneath those acrid vapors, dull red castings turned from their moulds and glowed in shadowy half-lights.

Beyond, great hammers bit the white hot billets and the ceaseless rataplan of lighter blows from steady hands rang true, day by day. There, again, a host of brawny, brainy men gave each of his best that, in the end, it might be as though the old-time distance were no more.

Then, one day, after a great shell of steel had loomed big in the shadows, for a time; after it had felt the settling of a little thread of linen across its girth and the drawing of another and another gossamer thread along its sides; when the silvery bubbles of the levels had said "true" and those threads had grown into great bands of the harness of steel and were shackled to the giant shell with bolts more unyielding than the rocks that gave them; after eager-eyed young men had seen Dinwiddy's pencilled lines and their own, as well, transmuted into adamant, and older men, with silvered hair, had watched their petted patterns of wood grow almost everlasting under the hands of sturdy young men in whose veins the blood still ran hot and red: When all of these marvellous things had duly come about, there crept forth from its shelter, upon this first new day, a hesitating but superb locomotive, and Yates, superintendent of motive power, was there to see and call it good. She looked upon the river with low-voiced questioning, for a time; played with whispered greetings or sounding shouts along its banks for a little while, and then withdrew into her shelter again, unshackled and asleep.

Far out in Villa Rica, Stoner, of the maintenance of way, was working feverishly. From Balceta to Villa Rica and on to Alta Vista, he had long been flitting regardless of the rising or the setting of the sun, building or strengthening bridges, straightening curves, cutting, filling, and laying metals of unheard-of weight, against the time when Dinwiddy met him in Villa Rica yard one morning, and simply said:

"Stoner, the first one is coming across the desert, east of Alta Vista, pulling freight to break her in."

"I am ready!" replied Stoner, and together, their faces softened into the look of men who rarely find time to smile. Then they went soberly upon their busy, different ways.

She was coming! Upon one other day of waking days she had found herself, under the wide sky of the prairies, along strange waters. Then she had droned and crooned her way across the quiet prairies onto the wide and lonely plains, beyond the Mississippi, beyond the Missouri, and again she had come roaring and battling through swirling spirals of sand that leaped out of the blackness of the night and dragged at her with clutching hands, until at last the swelling dunes unfolded under the coming of the sun and showed the mountains frowning down upon the treachery of the desert.

Then she had crept into the depths of Big Canyon, where the snow-capped mountains sent down clear torrents to the awakening plains and the profound silence swallowed up her mutterings.

Once more she went forward, toiling into the heights with many a roar of awakening strength, many a deep-voiced challenge to the mountain hosts that barred the way, and when night again had fallen she stood, free and alone, where the scrub pines crowd down toward the tracks in the bottom rim of Villa Rica crater, and the stars ofttimes twinkle in friendly ways above them.

But now, there was an ominous stirring of the winds that had followed her from the desert, up through the far canyon and across the great plateau to the crater's rim. Yet she stood crooning, as it were to herself, of the labors newly passed and whispering of a victory won in a world that was strange. Murmuring to the pines and twinkling back subtly the brilliant signals of the stars, she lay brooding, waiting, while the winds crept higher above the crags and dipped deeper into the crater and bore an ominous muttering from the mountains.

There, the men of Villa Rica gathered about and groomed her, Dinwiddy, Enderby, McPeltrie, with no lack of other willing hands to set her trim and ready.

Stoner came, thinking of his track and bridges with a challenge in his eyes, and looked upon her sternly until the beauty of her grew upon and won him. Then he smiled as upon a favorite son who, perforce, had suddenly appeared a man. Reaching strongly for Dinwiddy's hand he said:

"Man, you have done it! I congratulate you."

"Hope we have, but not yet proven," replied Dinwiddy with a ring of determination, held in strong reserve.

"She will win," declared Stoner, and went his way into the night.

Out of the big city by the lake, across the unresisting prairies, mounting higher and higher upon the plains, the finished line of royal blue with its priceless lading of life and light and rich caparison had been speeding swiftly through the long day and far into the lowering night.

Now, Johnson and Muller, with the boasted engine 747 and another of her kind, were lifting the brilliant line of living blue hard up over the last great swell of the foothills, and presently the deep call of their coming was blown down gustily through the east notch of the crater to the anxious group below. The white shaft of light from Johnson's hard-worked engine shot fiercely across the high darkness and then fell wavering swiftly into the depths. The trailing constellation in its wake grew into a definite galaxy of electric stars that swept downward and fixed itself brilliantly in the crater's bottom.

"You 'll never do it with one engine, Enderby!" yelled Johnson savagely from the first engine cab, as he glanced at his watch while going by.

But Muller, as the beaten pair cut loose and drew slowly away, called gamely from the second cab:

"You hit them, Pap, and never mind us!"

Dinwiddy, standing silently in the swirling darkness beyond the new engine, wavered for a single moment and half turned toward Bunnel, the despatcher, who stood watching within easy call upon the platform. It would be surer, though bitter, to take, even now, the offer of a second engine which he had refused stoutly. "In case of doubt —"

He stiffened and stepped quickly to the gangway of the new engine. His voice rang out above the rasping of the winds:

"Enderby! McPeltrie!"

The cleft in his upturned chin gleamed livid and grim in the flaring light of a torch in the gangway as the men stooped to his call.

"Twelve minutes to the bad!" he said bitterly. "Get it back for Villa Rica! Get it back for me! It 's in this engine. She 's mine, get it!" he finished desperately.

McPeltrie nodded swiftly and turned for a last searching look into the glare of the purring fire-box.

"Go stay by the end of the wire, son, and listen to what Bunnel tells you! Stand away now, the switch is over!" replied Enderby, stooping low above the stalwart figure in the rim of light. Then he stood up strongly, seeing not only a superior standing there below him — but Dinwiddy, the man whom he honored and loved. With the swiftness of youth retained in the heart, he settled to his task at the levers and gently touched the waiting engine.

Darkly and swiftly, the storm banks had crept above the peaks and blotted out the stars. Stealthily, they had crept down among the restless pines toward her. Blue-white glares of the lightnings began leaping and darting among the peaks and sheening their vivid gleams upon her faultless coat while crash answered crash from the crags above and boomed and bellowed down among the pines closer at hand.

Still crooning and whispering, chuckling softly and unafraid, she moved back quickly a little space under the hand of Enderby, to meet the dust-wan but brilliantly lighted line of life and royal blue that had fled up from the desert into the clutch of the coming storm.

She touched it gently for a moment, sighed, stammered, then suddenly roared and raged back the rising voice of the furies. Quickly steadying, she drew away strongly with the gleaming train toward the upper heights. Then, sweepingly, the gates of destruction seemed thrown wide and it was as though the pent-up furies of the ages burst forth, unshackled.

Furious waters were loosened from above and fell blindingly upon her while the gray pall of the desert's dust slipped like a discarded mantle from the priceless train in her wake and set it forth brilliantly anew against the lurid flashings of the night.

Strongly, steadily, with ever-increasing sureness and hope, the hearts of the men as one with the heart of her, she went out against the warring hosts of the mountains, herself for a time invincible.

Rejoicing in her strength, booming forth her deep-voiced
defiance to the winds

Rejoicing in her strength, laughing, whispering, booming forth her deep-voiced defiance to the winds, she won the rim of the crater and plunged guardedly but swiftly down to breast, again, the further heights.

One by one, she took the strongholds from the grasp of the storm. The Chimney Cut, Sacromonte, the Smoking Hill, followed quickly in their fall before her heavy onslaught, while, flashing back the lightning, glare for glare, she fought onward to the greater heights, sped downward to the mouth of threatening El Soledad, and plunged, straight and unchecked, toward her final battle against its writhing heights.

The redoubled winds came screaming down out of the ragged gorge into the face of her, and for long minutes of heavy laboring the deluge of waters and winds fell upon her before, at last, she weakened and lagged.

In the dim interior of the quaking engine cab, the glinting water-line in the glass was rising, ebbing, rising but always ebbing a little lower above McPeltrie's anxious eyes. The vital shadow upon the gauge face was creeping downward. The pace was slackening though the lever dropped lower, until, at a mutual nod that broke his haggard stare from the steady eyes of Enderby, McPeltrie shut the water off.

Soon, the shadow upon the gauge face ceased its ominous downward creeping and stood stubbornly far below its ordered place. Then grudgingly, it began its slow movement upward. But, in the glass, the dancing glint of light crept rapidly lower, disappeared, surged restlessly upward, disappeared, and rose no more. The water was gone from sight. Stop, and lose irretrievably? Go on, risking death, swift and sure, from a scorched and exploded boiler? Fight onward and win? Which should it be? These were the deadly insistent questions that throbbed in the brains of Enderby and McPeltrie, while the straining moments passed.

Battle as they would, the precious minutes were again slipping by seconds, from right to wrong side of the exacting schedule, dripping away intangibly, as blood drips, unstayed, from a strong man's hidden wound, and, as blood, these strong men in their working agony of suspense grudged them, drop by drop, and second by second.

Between his fierce fightings with the fire, McPeltrie's eyes eagerly sought the eyes of Enderby, but the old man gave no sign except to draw from the boiler a saving, fluttering breath, at the lowest test-gauge, while out in the ruck of the storm, in the crashing conflagration of the skies, the furies went mad in the joy of their apparent victory.

Bending doggedly to his task as the engine beat her way sullenly into the heart of the fray, McPeltrie straightened suddenly in the white glare from the open furnace door and voiced a savage cry.

"All right, Pap!" he shouted. "I 've found it! She 's been lifting it out at the front!"

He thrust and cast a covering of coal upon the deadly gray spots, then deftly opened the feed again and sprang to the box, beside Enderby. With his blackened lips close to the old man's ear and his blazing eyes dipping deep into the anxious but smiling eyes of Enderby, he shouted again:

"Had a hole somewhere! Knew it but could n't find it! I know her now, Pap! *Hit her hard!*"

The glinting water-line soon began creeping up in the glass and Enderby smiled and fluttered the test-gauge no more. The shadow upon the gauge face crept up and up until suddenly the great boiler gave voice above the steadily increasing roar from the stack, and the savage hissing of the column of escaping steam, shooting upward from the dome into the swirling sheets of rain, rose triumphant over the multiplied voices of the storm.

With strength renewed, she beat her way to the crest of the canyon, then sped, leaning, around the lips of the swift descent, careening majestically down the wider sweeps while the rough fingers of the gale clutched and tore futilely at her rocking bulk, racing madly across the lower dips and levels, tossing back the fringes of the waning storm and rushing out with a burst of resistless speed at the last, into the lessening night winds, the tender new-waving grasses, and the clear light of the stars in the quieting dome of the sky.

Finally, she halted, whispering and crooning, amid the watch-lights of sleeping Balceta, and stood, for a little space, panting gently in the half-hush of distant thunder tones, at peace and at one with the line of royal blue.

The Flyer was born. Washed of the skies, baptized of elemental fire, she was godfathered by these dauntless men, and by such as they, who could not look upon her as a thing quite inanimate.

"Mack," said Enderby softly, as he peered proudly about her aloft and below, touching gently here and there, "she 's nigh about human. Never was such an engine, eh? The boy has sure done it!"

"Y-e-s," drawled McPeltrie. "But how about you, Pap?"

"Oh, yes,— yes, of course," said Enderby joyously. "And you, I 'd reckon in, some heavy."

McPeltrie laughed happily and drew his sleeve once more across his steaming face.

"Just Number Seven, on the new card, Pap. On time!" he said.

There, in the quiet of the night, they gave her over, intact, to other hands as sure, for her further journey down to the coast. A little later, others of the Flyer's kind, powerful, swift, beautiful, and complete as she, came regularly, glinting, fighting, speeding through the rugged fastnesses roundabout Villa Rica and beyond.

Severally, in turn, the senior members of the water-tank caucus have battled and sped them safely to their journey's close, or launched them afresh from the upper division's end. Yet, somehow, no subsequent trip, however well-ordered or bravely won, has ever quite attained the degree of eminence, in Villa Rica annals, that attaches to the tank-bench record of that first memorable run, in which Enderby presided at the birth of the Flyer.

CHAPTER XV

PARRY, AS A MAKER OF WAYS

"NO," said Barstow, the axeman, pursuing a fragmentary conversation, "you can't tell actual doin's that 's into a man's past life by seein' him set up to his meals, all comfortable an' relaxed.

"It 's likely that if all men that 's earned hangin' an' jailin', as law goes, was to be hung and jailed proper, there would n't be enough able-bodied citizens runnin' loose to keep the jail wood-box full an' defeat weeds from runnin' riot over the sem'nary lots — lessen it 's women that tends to them duties."

They were sitting, Barstow and young Nate Clymer, just within the open door of what had become known as Barstow's shack, not far from the small field-office of John Parry, in Harmony Canyon. A year or more had passed busily since the days of agony and suspense which had ended with Parry's rescue of Balceta from fire and drought, and when it had been decided to extend track up Harmony Canyon from Villa Rica, to reopen the old coal mines, Stoner, upon whom the chief task had fallen, sent back a call of the mountains for Parry.

Parry had come, definitely to cast his lot with the high country, and with his family was now established in Villa Rica, six miles down, where the canyon opens into the ancient crater, which is now the wide circular valley of Villa Rica. With him had come Clymer, who, as boy and young man, had followed Parry's engineering fortunes variously and loyally in Chicago and upon the plains, until now he had risen to the dignity of handling a level or transit quite ably, although, even yet, he was not at all grown past handling rod or chain as well.

Barstow, whom Parry had found as his one important legacy from the prior workers of the mine, had contentedly remained guardian of axe, stakes, and chain. A sort of hail-fellowship was growing up between Barstow and Clymer, based largely, no doubt, upon their common experience in the open air and quite regardless of the disparity in their ages and points of view. The deep of the canyon mellowed commonplace sounds from the shaft-head and of other outside mine work, and gave a comfortable sense of stability and industrial accomplishment to their surroundings as they came up each morning from Villa Rica, or, perchance, remained at Harmony camp and pursued the daily programme under Parry's direction. They were all coming to feel quite at home with their work and with each other.

So, partly because he was absorbed in an elated sense of his own growing importance, and partly because he liked to note Barstow's rare departures into a limitless sort of inborn philosophy, Clymer said nothing, upon this occasion, in reply to Barstow's deliberate announcement, but continued petting and gently burnishing with a bit of chamois the telescope and lenses of the dismounted transit which lay across his knees.

The sun smiled broadly in through the doorway and glinted approvingly upon the slender steel of a one-hundred-foot tape, every successive tenth of which Barstow was oiling and inspecting, as he passed it slowly through his knotted fingers. Half a dozen criss-crossed loops were added to the growing mound of loops in the little corral formed by his cross-legged position upon the floor of the shack, before he spoke again.

" When you find a man that wa'n't born in these parts comin' as far out as this from them big camps like New York, where folks ain't none too polite to crowd a cripple offen the board-walk, but thinks they 're too durn polite to eat pie with a knife when they 're hungry and needin' it, you can jest make up your mind onto one thing: He 's either got sand; real, clean-grit sand into him, and the makin's of a mighty desirable citizen of the republic; or else he 's jest slid out from some o' them big bresh-heaps, like a scared weasel when the beagles gits close up onto him, an' ain't worth much more than his hide an' bounty.

" Nature has writ a good many things plain onto her own face, an' o' course that means people's faces, likewise. All you got to do is learn to read picter writin', same as Injuns an' Mex'cans, an' some of us fellows that 's always had to know it, an' you 'll read a man's face close enough to trail by. Course there 's, now an' then, one that 's slick enough to smudge things over s'ficient to dim the trail for a spell, but circlin' around some, you 're sure to pick it up, if you know the signs.

" Now, you take a man like Mr. Parry, with a face open an' honest as a white-faced Hereford. Don't take no guessin' to settle that he 's clean-strain all through an' dependable, beef or yoke. There 's a man the hand o' the law never tetched ner chased, you 'd allow, an' never will, most likely. He 's that —"

A convulsive chuckle won the mastery over Clymer's efforts at restraint and broke out into a ringing burst of glee that freed the metal cap of the transit telescope from his shaking hands and sent it rolling in unsteady curves to the feet of Barstow.

"Boy," said Barstow looking up in grave displeasure, as he caught the rolling cap and tossed it back, "it may be my p'int o' view is sort o' shet out by a limb in the way, but I don't see a mite that 's funny in them remarks!"

"No!" said Clymer, instantly serious. "I was n't fair, Barstow. But, would you suppose that Mr. Parry ever was arrested in Chicago?"

"None whatever," replied Barstow, promptly shifting his loyalty to a new base, "an' I would n't feel called upon to hold it against him serious if that town did make sech a fool play. It 'd only show what I says a while back; that them big towns is some reediclous!"

"Well, he was!" smiled Clymer, with dancing eyes. "And they got me, too!"

"At one and the same time?" asked Barstow, cautiously.

"Yes," replied Clymer, with no trace of mortification. "Both at one whirl of the loop!"

Barstow's face settled into his grizzled beard until it was half buried there and his heavy fingers passed gently over several tenths of the tape before he again looked up. Then, he spat deliberately at the crest of a horned toad that was reconnoitring the rough slab step outside the door, and saw his aim strike true.

"A man that 's been in this country as long as I have don't indulge in much guessin'," he then announced, "but, your disposition bein' more triflin' than outrageous, if I was suddenly called upon to say, I 'd allow that mebbe that fracas was of your doin's."

"It was," admitted Clymer. "At least, part of it was. Do you know Chicago, Barstow?"

" Jest about enough to keep away from it. An' that 's a whole lot, for my use!" said Barstow, with deep conviction.

" Well then, you know the Union Loop in the downtown district, and, perhaps, the line of elevated railroad that leads off across the river and into the northwestern part of the city.

" Mr. Parry is an experienced maker of ways. He is one of the engineers who made a way for that line of elevated, running the base-lines and putting down the foundation bents for the structure. And I was his cub rodman, on my first big job.

" The company bought its right of way mostly through the back yards of that thickly built section and the experiences of the right-of-way man, as they called him, would, if told, make an ordinary army campaign seem trifling in some respects. But, for that matter, we who came after, to make the actual location, and later set the foundations, were not received with a shower of bouquets, by any means. The ground was largely acquired by condemnation proceedings and when we came upon the field the claims were not all settled, though all were sure to go through, finally.

" Ruggleston, the right-of-way man, who went ahead directing the tearing down of fences and the removal of buildings, carried a box of mixed candy, a few beer checks, a black-jack, and a thirty-eight calibre automatic revolver. If he failed to make a successful entry with one of these, he always made it with another. He had a wide, disarming laugh, but a jaw that shut like a steel trap, on occasion, and, taking it altogether, he was an able diplomat and got through with comparatively little personal damage to himself."

" Did the Chicago marshal an' his depeties git this here Ruggleston when they made the round-up you 're relatin' about?" interrupted Barstow. "That 's no sort of an outfit for a white man to tote around, an' they 'd ought to roped him on suspicion, seems."

"No," laughed Clymer, "they did n't bother Ruggleston any. That was all fixed up in advance, at city headquarters. The road had to go through, you know!

"Well, on the morning I 'm thinking about, things seemed to come to a quick focus. We had been working for some weeks with both transit and level, along an alley where the line parallels Sheffield Avenue below Wellington Avenue, staking out bents big as an Oklahoma storm-cellar and the digger-gang, about a hundred Italians, was following up, sinking the foundation pits, as much as twelve feet deep. It made a wilderness of the place.

"There was one double lot where an old man had sat every day, for two weeks, on the second-story back porch of his home, defending his ground against invasion until his claim should be settled. We had come to a speaking acquaintance with him in passing to the work just beyond, and Mr. Parry, who is one of the most bashful but politest of men, as you know, got into the way of calling to him each morning:

"'Good-morning, grand-pap! How goes the battle this morning?'

"'Oh, fair, fair!' the old man would reply, and draw a white muffler closer about his gray face, while he shifted his double-barrelled shotgun to an easier position along the porch rail and scanned us narrowly."

"That old man 's a credit to his camp!" declared Barstow.

"On this particular morning," Clymer resumed, "Sigmund, the big Swede foreman for the contractor, was walking past with us, when Mr. Parry hailed the old gentleman, as usual, but got no response. He sat there stooped and white and still, with the gun protruding out over the railing, but gave no sign of having heard.

"'Asleep, poor old fellow!' said Mr. Parry. 'It's rather a hard task for the old man.'

"But, Sigmund, who never gave evidence of more than one main idea, that of sinking pits and setting truncated concrete pyramids solidly in them, walked softly across the open lot and looked up closely at the old man's face. He came back, in a few moments, to where we had halted, and said:

"'Just run out a tape and set them stakes, Mr. Parry! It won't harm the man none! I'll talk to him if he wakens.'

"Mr. Parry figured it for a moment, and maybe thinking it might help to get the old man used to the idea when he saw the stakes, told me to catch the reference-point in the base-line in the alley.

"We set up the transit on Station 64 plus 50. I fastened the link of the tape there and in a few minutes we had pushed the stakes down softly, and done the rest of it. Two bents were staked out under the old man's gun, and he had not yet moved when Mr. Parry and I went on up the alley.

"We came back half an hour later to catch a bench-mark and Sigmund was just ordering his diggers out of the pits. The digging was done there, except for the final staking of depth, and the men were quietly scrambling up over the big mounds of yellow loam, when the back door opening onto the porch above swung open, and then a woman screamed.

"She appeared to take no notice of the men or of the newly dug pits, but fell weeping upon the old man's shoulders, as the shotgun came thudding down and discharged itself into the earth of the garden."

"Cashed in?" asked Barstow.

"Yes," said Clymer. "Dead as Cheops! That is what

Sigmund had seen when he walked over. Mr. Parry told him plainly that he felt as though he had been tricked into robbing a dead man."

"Well, I 've seen claim-jumpers bad hurt for less doin's," ventured Barstow, "an' I reckon Mr. Parry did n't mean it to come out jest that way."

"No. He felt very badly about it," Clymer said, "and that gave an unusually serious air to the day's work, from the start.

"We had just come down from carrying the old man into his house, when the engineer in charge of the field came up the alley and told us to go up into the next block and stake out six bents on another contested place. He said that the claim had just been settled at court, seven miles down in the heart of the city. Then he turned away and went back down town.

"We went immediately to the place. That 's where the hand of the law touched Mr. Parry! And, between you and me, he has never been what you could call an entirely free man since."

"Son," said Barstow, with voice well lowered, "is this here yarn alludin' to p'int out towards Mr. Parry bein' a fug'tive from jestice? If so, I reckon I don't see the properness, as comin' from you!"

"Oh, no! It 's proper enough," maintained Clymer, "but his liberty is slightly restricted!

"You see, Barstow, it was a delicate job and had been handled very carefully, bearing upon this particular property. This was a row of homes, not rented tenements, and the people were what you would call high-grade. They knew their rights, to a dot. The close board-fences had been removed before the tie-up came on the question of price, and the sodded back lawns, each with its flower beds and fountain, lay open to the alley, but as yet untouched.

"The old gentleman who built the solid row of five handsome brick houses fronting upon the avenue had planned to keep his children about him, and as each one married, he gave one of the houses as a home. An unmarried son and daughter still lived with him in the nearer end of the row. The father was an invalid, whom we had never chanced to see.

"But it seemed all right now to proceed. We set up the instrument on the base-line, at the nearest lot, and were upon the lawn, proceeding in the usual way to stake out. I had driven one corner stake and Mr. Parry had his thumb upon the tape, stooping to locate the next stake, when a tall, serene-faced young woman, with the steadiest of eyes and the truest oval of a face that ever I have seen, came walking across the grass with as much composure and sureness as if she were walking down the central aisle of a church of which she was a member in good standing.

"'Don't drive another stake!' she said, just before reaching us.

"I don't believe I'm over-sentimental, Barstow —"

"No," agreed Barstow, with an affirmative nod into his beard. "Not to say some flightsome, though!"

"But the girl's voice sounded to me like mellow-toned bells telling a valley's folk that the day's work is done," Clymer finished without heeding the interruption. "There was something fine as well as final in it, and I felt that we were very near to something unusual and positive.

"I settled back upon the grass, with a stake in the air, while Mr. Parry turned red as a sunset and stood holding to the sagging tape with both hands, as though it were his last hold of a life-line in wreck and storm.

" 'Don't you know that you are trespassing upon our property and that you have no right to be here?' she asked. Meanwhile, she set her left foot firmly upon the spot where I had touched the sod with the second stake.

" 'No, ma'am —,' Mr. Parry managed to get out as he lifted his hat. Then he kind of choked or gurgled, or something, and I came mighty near rolling over on the grass and laughing, to hear him saying such a drivelling thing to a girl, after the way I had seen him thrash out a gang of 'Little Hell' toughs that tackled us one time when we were running preliminary down by the river.

" I did n't do it, though, because I caught the look in her eyes just then! It was n't angry, but you could n't have laughed if you had tried. So I talked a little, instead."

" Uh-huh!" said Barstow, looping another length of tape upon the floor.

" You see, I could n't sit there and say nothing after Mr. Parry edged away to the transit in the alley! While I explained to her that we were under orders and just about had to stake it out, I kept moving the stake around a few inches, knowing that a little difference like that would n't spoil the pit location, and meaning to drive it down while I talked to her.

" 'Yes, but my brother Ben was to send us word the very minute the claim was settled, and we have not yet heard from him!' she urged. 'Oh, if Ben were only here, you should not do that! Don't dare to drive that stake!'

" Wherever I put the point of the stake her trim little foot was always there just ahead of it and I got to thinking how I'd feel if that were my home and the claim unsettled. So I quit playing tag with her foot and just settled back again on the grass. I told her fairly what I should do if it were my home.

"'I'd just go and 'phone to Mr. Ben, if I were you,' I told her, 'and then tell the policeman on the block to come and arrest us or drive us off the place, if Mr. Ben says we are wrong.'

"'And while I am gone you will turn those diggers in here and ruin our home!' she said indignantly. 'Oh, mercy! There they come now! Oh, dear, if Ben were only here!'

"Sure enough, Sigmund was coming up the alley with the diggers, shovels glinting and pick-axes swaying, same as 'the Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold'— only there was n't much 'purple and gold' in that aggregation; nearly every other color, though!

"'No, we won't!' I assured her, and called Mr. Parry over. I was pretty sure, anyhow, that he was taking a good look at the girl's face, through the transit telescope, instead of checking up on the front and back sights on a barn in the alley and on the rail of the back porch behind her, as he was letting on.

"'Will you wait?' she asked anxiously, after he had come over and understood the proposition.

"'Yes, ma'am, we will wait fifteen minutes,' said Mr. Parry, with his hat in his hand. 'But I don't see how we could possibly wait longer without orders to do so.'

"'Very well,' she said. 'I believe I can trust you!' and away she went.

"She was n't any more than around the corner toward Sheffield Avenue when Sigmund came up even with the lot we were on and shouted to his gang to fall in where he saw the first stake we had driven.

"'Not yet! Hold them off a bit, Sigmund!' commanded Mr. Parry, raising his arm pretty sharply, to impress the diggers who were already crowding upon the lawn. And Sigmund promptly threw both of his arms into motion above his head and began protesting about the loss of time.

"While they stood in that position, with the shovels and picks joggling and heaving all about them, I happened to glance up Wellington Avenue way and saw a policeman's helmet and face poked around the corner of the alley for just one look, and then it disappeared.

"You see, with the gunshot, and the old gentleman dying that way just in the next block below, and the inquest not finished yet, things were a good bit stirred up at the Sheffield Avenue police station that morning, and so when the young lady called the patrolman's attention in passing him, he just took a look up the alley, hot-footed it to the call-box, and turned in a riot-call. That 's the way it showed up afterward.

"Well, I had seen Mr. Parry and Sigmund have it out pretty often over delays before that, and Mr. Parry always won. So, I was n't paying much attention, but just sitting there on the grass sort of playing mumble-the-peg with the stake, driving it an inch or two and pulling it up again, when I caught the flash of blue cloth and brass buttons alongside of me and I was being yanked to my feet and hustled off the patch into the alley. The patrolman had returned from the call-box and had me good and tight by the collar. I was spinning around in the alley before I had a chance to say 'How!'

"Up the alley came a squad of reserves from the Sheffield Avenue station, trotting at a double-quick. They grabbed Mr. Parry and Sigmund, with no questions asked, and hustled them into the alley among the diggers, with Mr. Parry protesting in decent English and Sigmund boiling out stuff that would shatter concrete.

"I caught up the transit, which was dancing and tottering around in the midst of the commotion in the alley, and shoved it into an unused truck wagon that stood handy. Then I was ready for the *bailee!*

"I don't know what you 've seen in your long and eventful career, Barstow, but I doubt if you have ever seen anything like what followed!"

"I dunno!" said Barstow, who had suspended operations upon the tape and was watching Clymer's face with eyes that had narrowed to mere slits under his bushy brows and were now gleaming like twin live coals. "I been through a Tennessee camp-meetin' love-feast! An' once, I see the Jicarilla Apaches raid a railroad gradin' camp, up around Raton Pass, along in '79 or early '80! I allow this here *bailee* o' yours bids fair to have features that 's favorable to both o' them events that I witness."

"Maybe so," laughed Clymer. "Anyhow, somebody had missed the regular cue at the Sheffield Avenue police station, and anybody who really knows Mr. Parry would n't expect to handle him the way that squad started in, unless it was battle that was wanted.

"He tried talking decently to them for a spell longer, but they kept on hustling him toward the corner behind which the two patrol wagons stood hidden, and when they got too rough he forgot all about their being police, I guess, or perhaps did n't care just then, and he belted one of them the stoutest upper-cut you ever heard landed under a man's jaw! That settled all notion of peace, for the time-being! There was n't a digger in that gang who would n't have welcomed the chance to dance upon the mangled remains of Sigmund, the Swede, and chant the Italian battle-song while at it, for he abused them without stint in getting what he thought the necessary amount of work out of them.

"But their feeling for Mr. Parry was a different matter. When, now and then, he had found some poor fellows working and unprovided for, he shared his lunch with them in the field and also bound up an occasional mangled finger or painfully bruised foot, until his name was spoken among them with a kind of awe and reverence. Not one of them but would have unslung his pick or shovel from under his arm, or even searched out a rusty stiletto if pressed too hard, in defence of '*Signor Parree.*'

"With the sound of that first blow, there was a rattling thud of pick-axes knocked free from their handles and the handles began bristling aloft over the heads of the diggers. A man leaped to the head of an up-ended cement barrel and shouted:

"'*Latis verborum! Vivat respublica! Vivat Signor Parree!*'"

"What seemed to be his complaint?" asked Barstow soberly.

"'Enough said! Long live the republic! Long live Mr. Parry!' was what he meant to announce," said Clymer, "and he emphasized his remarks by caving in the nearest policeman's helmet with the flat of his shovel, before the night-sticks got rightly into action and brought him down into the general whirl of sticks and clubs.

"I did n't see much chance to win anything worth while, empty-handed in that uproar, so I climbed up and stood on the tail of the wagon and watched the transit — and the row!

"Big Sigmund was the centre of one storm of night-sticks, pick handles, and shovels, and as near as I could make out, he was getting about all that was coming to him, from all quarters, until he went down and was trampled upon and lost in the whirl.

"Mr. Parry was hemmed in by a circle of flashing shovel blades and hissing pick handles that fended off and beat back the police struggling and clubbing to get through to him. He was safe as a church. The diggers were fighting his battle, and would n't even let him out of the circle to strike a blow!

"At first, it was all a tangled mass of night-sticks crashing upon the flats of shovels, and pick handles single-sticking with amazing skill against night-sticks. But it soon began dividing up into little writhing dots of single pairs at that kind of duelling and the diggers were holding their own.

"The alley and the lawn were strewn with battered police helmets, and with men down but striking, when Ruggleston, the right-of-way man, came running around the corner of the alley and leaped into the midst of the fight with a wide-throated yell that brought an instant's lull.

"'What the blazing thunder are you fellows doing? Do you know?' he bellowed into the face of the sergeant of police. 'You act like you don't know where your job 's at! Quit it! Get back there, into the alley, you diggers!'"

"Spoke right up to the marshal that way, did he?" queried Barstow. "I reckon you could n't talk that way to Abe Hazard, down to Villa Rica. Not lessen you was to lead up to it mighty gentle!"

"Oh, yes! Ruggleston talked, all right. He had been a captain of police, or something, before he took the right-of-way job. That is how he happened to be there, possibly. There are things, and things, in a town the size of Chicago, you know, and all of them have to be considered on a job like that.

"Yes, he talked, and struck out a few, too. The row stopped right there, same as the bits of color in a kaleidoscope stop tumbling when you rest your hand. Ruggleston stood alone with the sergeant in the middle of the lawn, alongside the one lone stake I had driven. Out in the alley the diggers were tying up their heads and laughing and crying around Mr. Parry, while they patted him on the back, and, in their impulsive way, called him their saviour, although they had saved him some lusty clips that had his name on them when they were aimed.

"He helped bandage a few heads, shook himself free, and made his way over to Ruggleston and the sergeant, just when the young lady came out of the house again, in breathless haste. She took one look at the littered ground and the mixed crowd of police and diggers and then hurried out to the group upon the lawn.

"'For mercy's sake, what has happened?' she cried. 'It is all settled as we wished it and you need not fight about it! My brother has just telephoned that the claim was settled when court opened this morning! He forgot to tell us earlier.'

"'Yes,' replied Ruggleston. 'It was all settled this morning. We are going to dig here, at once!'

"'Not with these men!' said the sergeant, laying his hand upon Mr. Parry's shoulder. 'This man and his whole bunch are under arrest and I'm going to take them in!'

" 'Come on over here a minute!' exclaimed Ruggleston, leading the way toward the truck wagon where I was still standing, too much wound up with the swiftness of the thing to have sense enough to climb down when it was over. I was only a cub then, you know!

"When they got close to the tail-board of the wagon, Ruggleston faced squarely about upon him and said in an angry undertone:

" 'Say, Bill, don't you *want* your job?'

" '*Sure,* I want it!' replied the sergeant.

" 'Then take your flatties and get back into the wagons! Go on back to the station and tell headquarters you pulled the whole bunch and that I'll bring them in, if they are ever wanted. Then listen what comes over the wire! You've made the rankest break that's been made on this whole job, Bill! You better crawl!'

"The sergeant 'crawled.' He loaded up and went, and we started in staking and digging. Just before noon, a broad-chested man with whiskers almost as big as yours came striding out of the first house and over the lawn which we were then staking out. He headed straight for me and I braced myself for more trouble.

" 'From the description which my sister gives,' said he, 'I believe that you are the young man who did most of the talking this morning and that the man at the instrument is the engineer she speaks of. Am I right about that?'

" 'I believe you are,' said I, edging away a space.

" 'Well, from what I can understand of it, my folks must have become somewhat excited, and I want to thank you gentlemen for the consideration shown when talking to my sister. Won't you please call your engineer over and make us acquainted? I am Ben.'

"The short of it is, nothing would do but that we should take luncheon with them at once. With the old father sitting in his invalid's chair at the head of the table, smiling out cheerily from a halo of snowy hair and beard, and the young lady of the stake affair presiding at the other end of the table, with 'Ben' across the board from us covering Mr. Parry's reticence with a glow of genuine pleasure, we had the most enjoyable hour imaginable.

"We were invited there several times afterward, to lunch or to supper, and we accepted gladly. I think Mr. Parry must have gone more than several. I lost track of it, after we got to working further up toward the end of the line.

"And, Barstow, that is considered about the best piece of elevated structure in Chicago to-day. It averages only fourteen hundred pounds to the total linear foot of cross-section, ready to run trains."

They sat silent for a time, Barstow resuming his critical inspection of the tape until he was convinced that nothing of the story had escaped him. Then he spoke.

"Clymer, seems like you 've run trail o' that pers'nal liberty business o' Mr. Parry's plumb into a timber-slashin' an' left it there. Your wagon-track don't seem to lead nowheres!"

"Have you ever noticed Mrs. Parry's left foot, Barstow?" Clymer asked with apparent irrelevance, as he sighted through the barrel of the transit to test the clearness of the lenses which he had been fondling.

"Have I noticed it?" exclaimed Barstow, sitting suddenly erect. "Well, bein's it 's feet that makes trails, mostly, I always aim to notice feet, some.

"But, times I 'm down to their place in Villa Rica I 've sot onto their front porch evenin's, listenin' to her voice, for the most part, an' notin' of her comfortin' an' counsellin' them chubby little boys o' their'n, until I 've just wore spots onto the paint.

"She 's the livin' image of a girl I knowed in Kaintuck', an' if that girl had n't been took to her heavenly home on high, airly in her womanly career —" He ceased abruptly and shook his big head, with the quick, silent movement of a deep-wounded moose, then resumed:

"I 'd allow to note that Mrs. Parry's left foot is a heap like her right foot — exceptin' that they 're mates, o' course!"

"Yes," said Clymer after a moment's pause. "That left foot of Mrs. Parry's is the foot that was set under the point of the stake, and therefore, she is the girl who, upon my advice or in spite of it, had Mr. Parry and me arrested.

"That is the fine difference in the feet, as I see them! And, of course, Mr. Parry has never since been quite as free as he was before that day."

"Uh-huh," said Barstow gravely.

And then, while he wound the tape carefully into its case:

"Son, I hold that to be a mighty allurin' tale, but, speakin' free an' friendly, there 's some things into this here earthly life that 's too small to mention in general conversin'; an' Mrs. Parry's feet is, mebbe, one of them.

"You 're twenty-one years an' upwards, an' a free-speakin' citizen o' the republic, but if it was me, I 'd aim not to mention that stakin'-out proposition no more, generally speakin'."

"That is right enough, Barstow," Clymer readily agreed, "but I thought you should know what kind of sinful fellow Mr. Parry really is. Especially, as Mrs. Parry told me to ask you to come to supper there, this evening.

"We are to go down on the coal drag, with Mr. Parry. Will you go? It is about time to stack up for to-day."

"I 'll be ready jest as soon as I can get cleaned an' breshed up a little!" replied Barstow, as the last of the tape went home into the reel and he arose from his cramped position on the floor.

CHAPTER XVI

McPELTRIE'S WOOING

IF it were not that, in the beginning, the rolling of a grain of sand may change a river's course; if McPeltrie had not boldly announced his creed in the matter of hold-ups and later made it good; if Camargo had not ambled forth to the fagot lands and brought McPeltrie home, broken and humbled in body, though victorious against the wrongdoing of Lucero's gang; if none of these things had previously come about, this sweep in the river of McPeltrie's life might well have taken a smoother channel and the story of his wooing might have been only the simple, old, old story which he whispered to his promised wife.

But, while life remains a thing of many small conjunctions joining up its main events; a complex thing of love and hate, of hope and fear, of joy often deferred to be tempered with a vain regret, no man is so brave that he may hope for other heritage and none is so favored that the rule of life shall yield to him.

Following the events of McPeltrie's jab at Jim Lucero, as he had been pleased to term the affair with more of levity in advance than in the sequence, it had seemed to him only civil that he should find his way to Camargo's dwelling in the Mexican quarter of Villa Rica and properly thank the old man for his timely aid upon the mountain.

More than that, in justice to him it should be said that a very real gratitude was in his heart as he wended his way among the humble little adobes and rapped upon the gay blue door of Camargo's home.

When the door at once swung open to his rap it framed, instead of the withered, half-supplicant face of Camargo, a slender, glowing embodiment of the ancient southwest. A girl of perhaps eighteen years, whose liquid dark eyes smiled up into McPeltrie's eyes of fighting blue, stood looking at him out of the calm reserve which even the babies of her race inherit from centuries of patient endurance, and which their elders further teach. But, hers was more than that. It was the half-smiling, confident reserve of a certain culture that was foreign to McPeltrie's preconceived idea of Camargo and his probable surroundings.

At the sound of Camargo's voice from within, he became aware that he was standing stupidly staring at the dull red of the dusky cheeks and the crimson of the small, full lips that had greeted him with a politely questioning: "*Señor?*"

He stammered an apology, and at the repeated request of Camargo, entered. The seared and solemn face of the old house-mother gave sign of neither joy nor sorrow out of the common for her race, but with that hospitality that knows no stint her voice was added to that of Camargo in a welcome to their guest.

Yes, *señor*, it was the daughter, Ynez, to-day come home from the great school at Balceta. It was a time of rejoicing, yes, but not yet of the *fiesta*. That should come later, but just now, they were about to sup for the evening. Would the *señor* honor their poor abode? The house was his, while he would. Would he not sup with them?

And McPeltrie, protesting in vain the simple purpose of his coming, yielded to their persuasion and sat with them through the brief repast of *tortillas,* savory *frijoles,* and the ever-present fiery *chili con carne.*

With his throat seared and aching with the unaccustomed fire of the piquant dish, he presently found opportunity to thank the old man for aid rendered upon the mountain, as well as to express his real appreciation of their hospitality. Then, unable, whether he would or not, to bear the fiery sting in his throat longer without showing his great discomfort, he beat a hasty retreat across town and dived into the roundhouse, with a mixed vision of that rare beauty that blooms and fades like the cactus almost in a day, and the ice-water cask that he most urgently sought, dancing before his eyes as he hastened into the gathering gloom of the smoky half-circle of housed locomotives.

The day following saw him on the run with Enderby, as usual, but from his restless and somewhat useless exertions upon the engine deck, it appeared that something more than the usual was at work within him. Finally, his halting voice sounded what seemed, under the circumstances, a far call. Without prelude or introduction, he suddenly asked:

"Pap, how long have you been married?"

Enderby's calm face lost none of its look of friendly interest in the doings farther back along the train, and with no sign of having heard, he did not at once reply. He was watching with his usual care from the cab window of the Overland Express, for conductor Waverly's uplifted hand to show above the leisurely movements of a bevy of gray-hatted cattlemen upon the station platform of the little adobe hamlet at which the train had halted.

McPeltrie, for the once ignoring the rule which required him to watch with his engineer for all signals, kept up an industrious sweeping of the engine deck. He knew that no question of his asking would go long unanswered by Enderby. In fact, for reasons best known to himself, he had chosen a moment in which to launch his inquiry when he knew that it would not be immediately necessary to face Enderby's questioning glance.

His broad young back was turned studiously toward the cab and he was thrusting the broom into its place upon the tender when Enderby drew in from the window, opened the throttle with a measured pull or two, and squared himself comfortably upon the seat-box.

"Eh? Married? About twenty-two years, I reckon," said he, addressing what he could see of McPeltrie's blue blouse without disturbing his own satisfactory position. "Yes, twenty-two years, come Christmas. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," replied McPeltrie lamely, "only I was thinking that you 've been glad and happy all that time, like as not; except maybe, times when you felt sorry."

Then he climbed hastily to his seat by the window, grasped the bell-cord, and leaned far out defaming himself fiercely for his bungling speech. Enderby was still chuckling visibly if not audibly when, with the train fairly in motion and no further excuse at the bell, McPeltrie turned to face him.

"Well, yes!" laughed Enderby in huge amusement, "and that 's a sight like saying, 'What color is a goat?' I reckon."

As there was no reply forthcoming and apparently nothing further required of him, he hooked up the lever and turned, smiling happily, toward the sunny stretches of the open which were again speeding in a widespread, never-closing circle around the engine.

They had taken their train but one station further upon the run, with McPeltrie alternately laboring feverishly at the fire and gazing hungrily across the cab at Enderby, before Enderby noticed his changing flush and pallor and called him over.

"Sick?" he questioned briefly.

"No, not rightly," replied McPeltrie in surprise; and, again recognizing the utter clumsiness of his reply, tried to better it by adding quickly:

"That is, I 'm hoping for the best!" to which he speedily supplemented, "Oh, thunder!" and lustily attacked the shaker-bar, which needed no attention whatever.

From all of this, Enderby reasoned that his surmise was correct and that the boy was ailing. They were getting home pretty fast, however, and he wisely decided to await further developments, which, as it proved, were not long in coming.

As they were speeding along one of the greater levels, McPeltrie suddenly thrust his shovel deep into the coal pile and stepped up close beside Enderby. He was filled with a high resolve and with what seemed to him much preparedness.

Great, strong and, ordinarily, aggressive McPeltrie! He emitted a sound that was between a gurgle and a groan, as the engineer turned questioningly toward him, and then his thoughts forsook him — all save one, and that one he spoke without grace or introduction.

"Mark, will you let me speak to her? I 've got to know; can't bear it any longer!" he said in white-faced suffering that paled him under the grime of his labor at the fire.

As the older man looked at him in kindly, silent doubt, McPeltrie added one word that sent the blood ebbing from Enderby's face and caused him to turn hastily to the moving world beyond the cab window.

"Ruth!" said McPeltrie, and stood waiting beside him.

In a few moments, Enderby turned and said slowly above the dull rumble of the engine's working:

"It 's likely that hurts less, coming from you, Jim, than it might from anywhere else, but I reckon I was n't ready to think about it. Stop in this evening, if you like. We have only her, you know, and I must talk with her mother."

"I will come," said McPeltrie quite humbly, yet with manifest relief.

The balance of the trip was run in silences of more than usual length while, to McPeltrie's eyes, the distant mountain heads, the wide expanses of the sun-bitten earth, the waiting groups at the stations, and even the faces of the dusty herds here and there near the tracks, seemed written full of the waiting intentness that possessed him.

Enderby was hearing the cooing laugh of a baby girl, which had softened the clamor of his engine, day by day, in the years that had sped so swiftly; feeling the searching touch of tiny fingers upon his face; looking, in the mirror of his mind, into the clear, questioning eyes of a blithesome young woman grown, his Ruth — their Ruth, and trying to cast a balance with himself for the time that had stolen so stealthily away.

It is one of the paradoxes of a father's love that, having eyes, it does not always see, and, having ears, it does not always hear aright; a kindly paradox of nature's making, perhaps that the tender ties that bind and cling may be broken the more quickly and mercifully at the last, when a nestling wings away from the home shelter. And Enderby, like many another, found himself unprepared.

With unspoiled candor and sweetness, Ruth Enderby was accustomed to bid her father farewell at the Villa Rica station when he departed, and almost unfailingly, to greet him at his return. From the time of his own first coming upon Enderby's engine, McPeltrie's eyes had been bright with admiration as he looked bashfully down from the gangway of the engine at Ruth's pretty, womanly face upturned to receive her father's kiss, and in time he had come to be included in the greeting or farewell by a cheery word or nod.

Little by little, he had found himself drawn toward the Enderby cottage, and gradually he had found a tentative place in their home gatherings, until, of late, his occasional calls had been falling much nearer together. Without knowing quite how much, he had grown to need a certain light of approval or understanding which he was sometimes able to kindle in the laughing or serious eyes of the girl.

The image of her supplely rounded, lithe young figure, busy among the old-fashioned flowers in the door-yard below the veranda, and her quick repartee ringing up with happy laughter in response to her father's quaint teasing, or to some more ponderous effort of his own evolved from his still unconquered reticence in the presence of women, had fixed themselves more strongly in his daily life than he had been aware.

The original liking, which the young people had discovered, soon grew to a measure of half-confidences which sometimes found them strolling together with Mrs. Enderby upon one or another of her many errands of kindness in the village, while Mark smoked and read to the point of peaceful dozing in the slanting rays of the sun, upon the lofty veranda.

At such times, Mrs. Enderby's placid face was often turned toward the purpling lines of the rim-rock, with the look of one who views the winging of a distant flight, while she, with her mother instinct, seeing most clearly of the four the trend of events, sometimes ill concealed a shade of sadness in her far gazing, yet never seemed wholly sad.

But nothing of sadness was apparent to McPeltrie. He had learned to look chiefly for the dancing light in the younger woman's eyes and to listen for the musical note of laughing approval of his clumsy bantering. His strong young body was pulsing with a new sense of the delightful fulness of life and his heart was singing in a strange gladness.

And now that this new joy had shaped itself within him into a thing so definite that it had become the keen anguish which he had voiced to Enderby on that great day, he burned with impatience for the arrival at Villa Rica and a sight of the waiting figure at the station. At last, the deep, long-drawn whistle of the Overland was answering the whistle of the oncoming Limited across the top of the crater and shortly they came to rest together at the station, far below.

Ruth stood upon the long board platform beside which Enderby's engine stopped and, at her side, clad in the blue drilling of the shops and roundhouse, stood young Harper, of the experimental staff, his broad, square shoulders towering above the slim figure of Ruth and his clear, manly face reflecting the light of her staid smile.

McPeltrie's face faded through various shades of red to gray as he acknowledged Ruth's grave nod of welcome and watched Enderby climb down to receive her warmer greeting and to grasp the hand of Harper in a friendly clasp.

It was all so different from what he had pictured as he worked the last feverish miles of the engine's homeward run that his heart sank in an unreasoning way, then sent the blood surging through him in a fierce flood of anger. Turning hastily to his final duties in the cab, he went with the engine to the pit, and dismounting with his belongings, disappeared into the roundhouse by a different way from that taken by

Enderby, who had resumed his place to cross the freed engine over from the main line.

Early evening brought him a better view and frame of mind, and when he started up the street he had no other idea than that of going directly to Enderby's home. When he neared the gate and saw the old folks in their usual places upon the veranda, Mrs. Enderby's hands were folded in unaccustomed idleness and the figure of Ruth, bending among the high flowering plants below, somehow told him that, thus far, all was well and that he had yielded to a senseless flash of anger without cause.

Even as his searching eyes discerned a strange, new look of welcome upon the mother face and his hand was lifting to the gate-latch, a sudden access of ungovernable bashfulness surged upon him, and with a sort of terrified surprise, he found himself enveloped in a sense of being stifled in a dense, chilling vapor.

He merely lifted his hat in response to Ruth's smile of welcome and walked on past the gate. Then, grinding his teeth in helpless rage at what he had done, he hurried on toward the steep trail that led up the cliff to his favorite outlook across the wide crater. With swift, climbing strides beyond the abrupt ending of the street, he was soon seated upon the flat-topped crag, buttressed into the wall of rock above.

The red slanting rays of the sun, which there struck the rim-rock obliquely, were climbing rapidly upon the rugged wall and the shadows in the valley were growing higher, deeper, and far-reaching. With his pulses again drumming strongly and the familiar, quiet scene sending up its subdued sounds from below, he reassured himself in shamefaced consciousness.

" In a little while, when the dusk is falling, I will drop in! " he said.

He was scarcely seated, it seemed to him, with his eyes upon the diminished figure in the old garden below, when the one broad shaft of remaining sunlight that glowed through the notch of the western pass and gilded the point upon which he sat, was broken by the arrival of some one at the head of the trail which led in just above him.

Turning, he arose in surprise at sight of Ynez, Camargo's one ewe lamb, standing clearly limned alone against the sky-line, almost within the length of a single stride.

" *Señor!* " she said, in the single word of soft-voiced greeting with which she had earlier welcomed him to her home, and held forth to him two waxen blooms of the cactus, one of crimson, one of white, the emblems to her race of deep regard and truth.

Advancing upward the step that made it possible for him to accept them, he saw Camargo, wearied with his long march beside his burros, lying prone upon the farther slant of the rock close over the crest that sloped away toward the timber lands.

With mixed memories of his own sorry plight when, upon another day, he had ridden dizzily in upon that crooked trail with Camargo's hand sustaining him, he chatted with them for a few moments, standing upon the crest, and then resumed his seat upon the rock as the little burro train and its owners headed in upon the descent and wound its way down into the crater.

With no clear idea of the significance of the little blossoms which he turned admiringly in his hands, and therefore, unknowing that the steel-blue glint of fire in his eyes had kindled that in the heart of Camargo's daughter which later would, with the impulse of her race, become a consuming fire, he mused in increasing composure:

"They are a good-hearted lot, Camargo's people, when you know them. Well, boy, you must be going down, unless you want to call yourself a rank outsider, and a c——. Nope, I 'm no coward, but I was certainly mighty scared, somehow."

At which, he took his way swiftly down the trail toward the cottage. He could not know that the young face in the garden below, upturned at an unfortunate moment in its accustomed farewell to the sun's last bright shaft upon the rock, had become ashen gray at sight of the two figures plainly outlined there.

Her exclamation, which was more than half a moan, had directed Mrs. Enderby's eyes also upward, but the low note of anguish did not reach the ears of Enderby, deeply immersed in the contents of his paper, at the farther end of the veranda. Then, too, the click of the gate-latch had made a timely distraction and Enderby took from the hand of Manuel, the Mexican caller, a telegram which he regarded with some surprise.

"Mother," said he, when he had read the short message, "I 'll go down to the roundhouse for a few minutes. When Jim stops in, just say that I 'll not be long away."

"What is it, father?" asked Mrs. Enderby, wondering at the jubilant note in her husband's voice, but with her eyes fixed upon the face of her daughter.

"This is a secret, mother, until I get back," he replied, and took his way down the street toward the tracks.

A few moments later, Ruth's stricken young voice was whispering upon her mother's comforting breast, within the seclusion of the cottage:

"Oh, mother, how could he? How could he? What does it mean?"

"Hush, dear, there must be something that we do not understand," replied the mother. "A little time does so much for us all."

McPeltrie, knowing none of these things, noted with deep mortification when he had come down from the rocks that the Enderbys were nowhere in sight and that the cottage blinds were closely drawn in the deep dusk. He hesitated uncertainly for a moment at the gate and then plunged dejectedly down into the village.

With anger at himself and misery surging through every vein of him, he turned the first corner of the main street and collided with lowered head against some one walking rapidly in the other direction. His hat went spinning across the rough board-walk and into the littered gutter. It was the last touch upon his smarting spirit and he straightened with a half-suppressed curse and squared himself for battle.

"I'm sorry for that! Perhaps it was my fault!" spoke an earnest voice, and he was looking fiercely into the friendly face of young Harper.

"Maybe you are! Maybe it was!" he ground out through his clenched teeth. "Seems like you are getting mighty numerous in this town!"

"I don't understand," said Harper in some surprise as he handed McPeltrie his fallen hat.

"Maybe you don't," replied McPeltrie with bitter sarcasm, "but you will if you cross my trail again!"

Recovering his hat from Harper's extended hand with a rude jerk, he jammed it upon his head violently and turned away, leaving Harper to wonder at his unusual display of churlishness.

Fast as McPeltrie walked, within the block he was traversing shame overtook him and he turned about to seek Harper with an apology. He had begun to see himself in a light that was anything but pleasing.

"I'll play the game and I'll win!" he said aloud. "If he's in it I'll beat him, but I'll play it square! I'm big enough," he finished with a bitter laugh.

But, his search was fruitless. Harper was gone, and making his way directly to his room, McPeltrie tossed restlessly upon his bed until at last he fell asleep with the shame of his gross insult to Harper and the weight of a lost opportunity tugging at his heart.

Enderby, returning meanwhile to his home, unfolded his secret.

"It's Dinwiddy," said he gleefully, "wiring from Alta Vista. He told me, a little while back, that he was going to run for it as soon as traffic eased a little, and have a month's visit and some fishing up there in the Geyser Water. He has his wife there and wants us to come up.

"What do you say? I've got it all squared for starting in the morning, if you'd like it."

He wondered some at the eagerness with which Mrs. Enderby and Ruth set immediately about their packing for the journey and also found time to wonder at the failure of Jim to stop in, but since he had no reason to suppose that his guess would not be as good as theirs, he asked no questions then, and the early morning saw them speeding away on the daylight special toward old friends and familiar scenes at Alta Vista.

McPeltrie got his first news of the departure of the Enderbys shortly after he had missed the old man from the water-tank gathering, later in the morning. But, as it chanced, nobody referred to the journey, and, somehow, he felt that he could ask no questions about Enderby before the group.

Finding Dodson busy about the engine of the Limited, in Enderby's stead, however, he could not longer restrain his question.

"Where 's Mark?" he asked.

"Gone to Alta Vista, with his folks," replied Dodson shortly. "Enderby 's getting gay in his old age. Gone fishing, by dad, and left me with this old kettle of an engine, at a minute's notice!"

This, although the engine was really very good, as Dodson was aware, but it was just a way he had of limbering up his wits for the day's run.

The month had nearly passed and McPeltrie, abstracted and unhappy, had worked through with Dodson, to the closing day of Enderby's leave. The Limited was hurrying eastward from Balceta, with Dodson and McPeltrie in the cab, while far to the east of Villa Rica the Overland was bearing the Enderbys home from Alta Vista.

Cooling his face at the cab window as the engine of the Limited sped swiftly down one of the many wide-curving grades, McPeltrie was more intent upon the vision of Mark's cottage and its lost joys than upon the things immediately about him. Therefore, the dim hour-glass shape of a mail sack, suspended against the prevailing gray of the desert, failed to catch his eye in the accustomed moment of the swift descent upon it.

The brooding sadness of his eyes flashed out, just a moment too late, in a glance of terrified recognition before the engine dashed by the sack, and McPeltrie swirled crashing down upon the engine deck and back over the lapsheet, against the coal gates of the tender, white under his grime, and still, except for the slender line of crimson that trickled slowly down from his temple.

"Glance blow!" said Dodson to himself as he straightened him out upon the deck and brought the train to a quick stop.

Even while Dodson was thus affording himself this poor bit of hope and consolation, Mrs. Enderby in the train speeding from Alta Vista was, by that irony which sometimes seems to rule events, imparting to Ruth a new light upon the incident of the crag above Villa Rica. It had developed from the councils of the parent Enderbys that Mark had passed the little burro train in the street, as Camargo and his daughter came down from the crag, which had the effect of making it quite of the commonplace order of things. Ruth, therefore, was smiling, ruefully, far away, while the little thread of crimson started abruptly from McPeltrie's wounded head.

So it came about, that when Muller, coming into Villa Rica with the Overland an hour later, drew slowly to a stop beside the Limited, which Dodson had just brought to a standstill there, he landed the Enderbys directly alongside the stretcher upon which McPeltrie lay.

Dodson and others were bending to bear him away from the group that had gathered at the spreading of the news of what Dodson's train was bringing. In the inner rim of these, and none more sad than they, stood Camargo and his daughter, Ynez.

"Why, it 's Jim," exclaimed Enderby, as the circle opened and they stepped into it from the car steps. He spread his hands with an involuntary backward movement, as though to withhold the sudden shock of it from Mrs. Enderby and Ruth at his side. But the control of events was not to be of Enderby's kindly guidance.

Some half-ray of understanding found its way to the be-numbed senses of McPeltrie at the familiar sound of Enderby's voice, and started anew the refrain of his own painful utterance which had wrought itself into a torturing monotone with the beating of the engine, in the sorry days just past.

" Mark," he muttered strongly, " will you let me speak to her? I must. Ruth."

" Oh, father ! " cried Ruth, as she shrank back into the old man's arms. " Mother ! "

The heart-searching pathos of that tremulous note which, in every tongue, has spoken a woman's awakening joy and sorrow, down, unchanged, through the ages, quivered in her voice, and now Villa Rica knew what it had only guessed, or hoped, before.

" Father, did you know? " she asked. " Mother, did he know? "

" Hush, child," her mother whispered. " Jim was to come in for his answer the night we went away. I don't know why he went on toward the cliff."

" I know ! " she spoke out bravely, forgetting the silent group. " I know all of it, now, you poor, big, timid boy," she mourned, stooping to touch McPeltrie's unconscious, bandaged face.

In that moment, her voice gained almost the depth of a mother's voice soothing a troubled child. The universal note rang true and full; so true and telling that it struck deeper into the secret soul of another suffering woman standing there than her flesh could bear unmoved. Unobtrusively, Ynez had edged ahead of her father and stood touching elbows with Abe Hazard, the marshal, looking down upon the brief enactment. Now, there was blazing in her eyes the primal fire of a tigress despoiled of her mate. Her hands were clenching and clutching spasmodically and her gaze was fixed hungrily upon the curve of Ruth Enderby's white throat, from which pitying words of love were welling softly.

Suddenly, she crouched as for a spring and Hazard's watchful eyes, never long at fault, quickly shifted to her straining body. Just once, he looked into her face, and then he caught her wrists in a grip like iron and pressed her slowly back toward Camargo.

With a cry that rang for many days in the ears of those who heard it, she wrenched herself free from Hazard's momentarily slackened grasp and fled swiftly toward the trail that mounted upon the face of the rim-rock. Camargo, swift beyond his years, instinctively followed, and while McPeltrie was being borne away to the hospital, Villa Rica stood wondering at the strange race up the rugged face of the cliff.

Once, she fell and failed to rise until the aged Mexican had come almost up with her. Then she bounded to her feet and ran stumbling up the remaining heights, close in advance of him. For a single moment, as Camargo's outstretched hands were about to close upon her, she stood outlined upon the top of the sheer crag, and then she leaped far out into the gay morning sunshine and came fluttering, sweeping down, a swift-moving vision of white gown and flashing red *reboso* against the purple-black of the rim-rock.

Camargo came stumbling down the trail, bowed and broken under the load of his grief, and they found her, a crumpled bit of white and red and dainty brown, whose imagination, fired by its one fleeting view of the white man's world beyond the confines of Villa Rica, had at last impelled her to flee from a world which she could not comprehend.

McPeltrie's weary days in hospital were frequently brightened by visits of the Enderbys and small delegations from the water-tank caucus, until his rugged strength had completely won back for him his active joy in life. The unhappy end of Camargo's daughter laid its sadness upon the little town for a time, but not too deeply, in a community that well understood the impulsive native heart. So well, indeed, was the sad affair understood by all that among McPeltrie's most faithful friends in the time of his convalescence were found, unfailingly, Camargo and his aged wife.

While the days followed each other swiftly, until another year had laid its early covering of green upon the favored places of the high country, McPeltrie's wooing went happily on. Then, one morning, the water-tank bench was deserted long before the coming of the overland express trains, and when Muller, later, pulled out with the train for the east, the trim gray-clad figure of the newly made Mrs. McPeltrie stood, upon the rear of Muller's train, beside stalwart Jim, whose bashfulness seemed to have fallen from him like a discarded mantle, in the new-found joy of his possession.

From the steadily lessening observation end of Muller's train, together they waved a farewell both tearful and gay to the waving group that included, not only most of the members of the adjourned water-tank caucus, but also Mrs. Enderby, the Camargos, and many others who were not to be found in the usual water-tank councils. And until the time of their return to the new cottage that had risen beside that of Enderby, the heart of Villa Rica, severally and as one, went out in well-wishing after the young travellers. Returning, the heart of Villa Rica continued to abide with them in well-wishing and friendly doings, while they dwelt there.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FIRES OF SORROW

"I AM an old man! Yes, very old!

"'When the red blood ran strong in the heart of the father of my father's father —'"

"Rod up!" ejaculated Nate Clymer, turning luxuriously in the litter of fresh-cut cedar boughs where, idly stretched upon a dizzy lip of cliff, he had been gazing in fascination into the depths below. "Ye gods of the sun, and of the moon, and of the constellation Pleiades! How old are you, Mr. Parry, and when was this?"

The young rodman's voice carried a half-serious note of youth defeated of its inherent primary knowledge of all things, and Parry, who kept a liberal measure of good-fellowship, without quite releasing the discipline with which he held his corps in the field, was not quick to reply.

"Clymer, you-all squawk like a young he bluejay!" Barstow, the axeman, drawled solemnly through his tangled beard, and spat far out over the lip of the cliff. "Mr. Parry, that sounds —"

"Like a man making medicine in the depths of an *estufa*," Clymer interrupted gleefully, "or from the inside of a rawhide tent!"

"Rawhide tent!" echoed the old mountaineer derisively. "Reckon it would n't hurt you-all, youngster, to listen a heap more. Tents wa' n't never made of rawhide, nohow!"

he advised, with a rare twinkle in his usually solemn eyes showing a slowly acquired liking for Clymer's sometimes aimless chatter.

"Seems like there 's nobody around here but Camargo, old enough, and wise enough, to talk such a way, Mr. Parry, and he don't talk none bountiful for common," Barstow finished, with a suggestive look at Clymer.

"Not a bad guess, Barstow," replied the engineer, calmly searching out a pouch and tamping his pipe. "It seemed not only reasonable — it was sinister, convincing, as he spoke last night upon the mountain, and I will own that I wanted to test it here, with the mine-workings before us in the canyon and you men to listen before the daylight goes."

"Try it on the dog, eh?" queried Clymer contentedly.

"As it were," replied Parry soberly.

His eyes ranged far out across the deep canyon and up the glistening, snow-clad slopes that rose steeply from the shadows below. He looked lingeringly down upon the darkening outlines of breaker and shaft-house, and upon rows of rough board cabins in a widening of the gulch.

When his glance came back at last into the brilliant winter sunshine that still bathed the bare brown cliff upon which they were halted for a breathing spell after a hard afternoon's tramp with transit and chain, the thick lenses of his glasses focussed upon the alert young face of Clymer, and, somehow, conveyed an effect of remoteness and reproof.

"Squelched," said Clymer contritely. And subdued for the time-being, but not humiliated, he locked his hands under the back of his head, settled yet more comfortably into his lounge of green boughs, and waited in respectful silence.

Parry struck a match, puffed a contented whiff or two, and resumed the book of field-notes which he had laid face downward upon the gnarled cedar root where he sat, at the first interruption.

"Clymer," said he, in his methodical way of clearing things up as he went, "I am only thirty-five and you are — less than that. But this was along about 1541, I should say, when Coronado and his celebrated bands of steel-clad mendicants and ruffians bruised and otherwise misused this strip of country, in the name of friendship and salvation. So, listen!"

"Whoop — ee!" remarked Clymer under his breath, but listened.

"'When the red blood ran strong in the heart of the father of my father's father and he was as the full-plumed young eagle upon these crags which, even then, were gray with years, my people knew the black rock that gleams like the eye of the serpent, and they wept upon it in their sorrow!

"'When the man Malinche and others of his Men From Heaven fell upon Tenochtitlan the people of my people were scattered wide and some came far to dwell in peace here by the great rivers, with the Pueblo. For many years they dwelt in peace and plenty and then, when the snows were white and heavy upon the land they sought them out again — Coronado, Alvarado, and Cardenas the cursed — to take the blankets and the winter's corn and ride them, naked under the shod feet of beasts, into the cold rivers.

"'Then the people of my people fled to these crags and in their caves built them fires of the black rock, that they might give no smoke sign, as the fagot fire, to lead the white men on. But, only in their great need they digged and burned the black rock, for the heart is the life and Huitzalopochtli, the great god of my people's gods, loves not them who dig to the heart of earth, and he will kill!

"'Where the rock is stolen the waters will fall and quench, quench, quench the lives of them that dig! I like not white men who are as the men of Malinche; nor yet the blacks who now dig in the valley, but you — you have kindness. I would not see you perish. Go no more into the heart of The Fires of Sorrow, *señor*. The time is at hand!'"

Closing the note-book and carefully returning it to his jacket pocket, Parry looked searchingly into the faces of his companions. Barstow was staring straight at the root upon which Parry sat and his impassive face gave no hint of any impression he had received.

"Your native here, and hereabout, whatever his origin, has a poetic strain," said Parry, "but what do you make of this? It has taken surprising hold of me."

Clymer turned slowly, until he lay face downward upon the edge of the cliff, his heels airily lifted above his back and his head craning out over the dizzy depths. His voice, when he had gazed his fill at the busy scene below, came back in a thin and wiry strain.

"I guess it's poetry, all right — or maybe *pulque!* But, what's he mean about the fire and water?"

"That," said Parry with his eyes upon Barstow's face, "is the question that he would not answer!"

"He said more truth than po'try!" spoke Barstow, rapping his pipe vigorously upon the heel of his boot. "I know nothing of the coming of his people, but this I know:

"There has been sorrow a-plenty for them here, far back and not so far. And, some'eres across the canyon, deep down in the old shaft that they call in their tongue 'The Fires of Sorrow,' may be the waiting water! Nobody knows jest what's there by now, though the story goes that there's nigh a score of Camargo's people caught down there when she filled and caved, first time."

"Old shaft!" said Parry tensely. "I have heard nothing of that! There is no record of it in my office!"

"Not wishing to differ with you abrupt, Mr. Parry, I think there 's a record. I 've carried chain and druv stakes a lot before you-all come out here to open up the new shaft, and once I see a picture, like, of them old workings — I think I see it sticking out of a box of things in my tool-shack again, t 'other day when we 're makin' ready to come out and run this last top-line. Likewise, I know them that 's seen that old shaft half full of water, before it caved the last time.

"Seems like the folks that worked this hard-coal prospect before the railroad took it wa' n't so very up to handlin' their business in this kind of workings, and there 's never so very much said about them *peons* that got caught — seein' they 're only *peons*."

"About where," said Parry rising, "would you say the old shaft lies, looking from this point? Could you locate it roughly?"

"Sure! To a dot!" replied Barstow, promptly rising and extending his long arm forward over the shoulder of the engineer. "Yon sink in the snow marks all that 's left of it above ground!"

Straight and deadly as a spear, Barstow's lean arm sighted across the mouth of the new shaft to a circular gray shadow upon the slope of snow above it, and a thrill of sickening fear shot to Parry's heart as his eye followed the line indicated. Of this, however, he gave no sign but stood fixedly studying the peaceful view below.

A locomotive was pushing a curving line of empties in upon the tipple spur. The slow throb of the pumps at the shaft-house mingled with the sharper barking of the locomotive's exhaust and sent a broad banner of white drifting upward and vanishing in the rare, dry air. The rays of the setting sun still fell in a flood of warm, golden light upon the lonely rows of board shanties in the canyon and softened their squalor to a greater semblance of comfort and of homes.

And now, the long-drawn exhaust of the slow and powerful hoisting engine added its deep undertone to the soft medley of sounds that rose to the cliff with the questioning of human voices, as the word went happily round among the cabins that the hoisting of the single shift had begun, in the depths. A little longer, and the sun sank behind the topmost crest, the quick dusk settled in the canyon, the heavy laboring of the hoisting engine ceased, and all was silent but the low droning of the great fan above the air-shaft.

From the shaft-house a cluster of little flames sprang up cheerily in the deepening gloom and moved away in wavering files toward the cabins lying dimly in the dusk. Then the deep melodies of the group of recently transplanted Mississippi negroes broke forth in resonant, syncopated minors that told of homesick longing, and high-keyed treble and thundering bass that told of hope, welling up to the cliff like a solemn song of victory deferred but sure:

"Yas, Lawd! Yas, Lawd!
De sun am ridin' low behin' de mou—un—t'in,
De pickaninnies laughin' roun' de doah,
An' all de niggahs singin' an' a-cou—un—tin'
De minutes till we gatha on de floah.
Foh we gwine to have a possum; mebbe taters; mebbe coon,

An' we gwine to chune de banjo an' de fiddle, mighty soon.
Yas, Lawd — *Yas,* Lawd! *Yas,* Lawd — *Yas,* Lawd!
De moon am ridin' high above de mou—un—t'in."

The distant cabins took it up and shrilled it back in more plaintive way, until the great gulch pulsed with the heart-throb of humble black folk cheering themselves against lonely night in the mountain fastness, far from their "Ole Miss'sip."

"*Yas,* Lawd! *Yas,* Lawd!" it welled up faintly and yet more faint, until the cabin doors opened and swallowed up darkly, one by one, the yellow, dancing glows of light. The men were safely up, and Parry, unconsciously, sighed with relief at the thought.

"Come, boys!" he said, and picking up transit, axe, and rods, they turned, hurrying, down the rocky trail to the camp.

"Just hand in the bunch of old tracings that you spoke of, when you come from the tool-shack, Barstow," said Parry, as he was entering the office door. "Furbish up your kit a while in the morning, if I am not here," he said, a little later, as Barstow handed in a dusty and tattered roll of tracings. "But be here early. I shall be going down to Villa Rica to-night. Good-night!"

"Good-night," said Barstow and Clymer, and Parry was left alone with his haunting doubt.

When the drag engine came back cautiously down the grade a few minutes later, with its loaded coal cars, Parry stepped out with steady strides from the office. Tossing a wrapped bundle into the gangway of the engine, he climbed up after it, and with a brief greeting to the crew, rode silently over the six miles of box-canyon into Villa Rica.

Daylight was breaking over the rim of the crater at Villa Rica when Stoner, division engineer, and Parry finally sat staring into one another's haggard faces. Their work of scaling, checking, and re-checking the legendary old drawings against Parry's carefully wrought-out new ones was finished.

"It 's close, Parry. Deadly close!" said Stoner. "But, it shows a hundred feet of solid coal between — if this old drawing is true to their workings."

"Yes," said Parry wearily. "If! That is what ruins men of our craft, sometimes, Mr. Stoner. Is n't it?"

"Parry," Stoner answered slowly, "we are exactly on a par with the train crew that overlooks an order but misses a collision only because the trains happen to meet in the open. By a chance, by mere luck, we have met this thing in the open, but, technically, it is a wreck — and I am the conductor!

"This country is alive with mine yarns; lost mines, abandoned mines, and mines that never existed. I heard something, long ago, of old workings in the canyon and mentioned it when I got first orders to take on the work of opening the new shaft. Headquarters letters say the old diggings were small and unimportant and now comes your old man Barstow, with a set of deep-mine drawings which he pulls from an old hip-boot in a tool-shack!

"It 's nothing short of — well, *tough*," declared Stoner with a crash of his massive fist upon the desk. "I have overlooked a play! Parry, I have too cursed much to do, with the heavy power coming onto my weak track and bridges. My recommendation was to make the mines a department reporting directly to the chief — why, Parry, I 'm yelping!" said the great, tired fellow with his customary fighting smile. "That don't help! Now let 's see. What does that last breast show?"

"One hundred feet upward from the bottom of the entry; angle, thirty degrees to the horizontal," replied Parry, as they turned again to the drawings.

"That 's it!" said Stoner. "That 's the spot that hurts! But it will hold if we let it alone, so keep them all out of there to-day; take your boys down and check up your base-lines and breasts. Verify your figures, throughout. There will be a protest from headquarters when the output falls off. We will meet that with prints from these old and new drawings.

"Got out on the main line without orders and did n't 'hit them,' eh, Parry? Well, I feel bad enough about it; bad as you do, but we did n't 'hit them'! Come over to breakfast with me and I 'll fix to send you out, first thing, on the yard engine."

And so it was arranged. Shortly after the shift went down the shaft for another day below, Parry, Barstow, and Clymer were lowered with the instruments and started plodding away from the faint light of breaking day above them, along the deep level toward the distant, threatening breast at the end of the drift.

The steam pipes from the upper station no longer snapped and crackled beside them and only the great intake pipe of the deep pump trailed on ahead of them to the sump. The darkness thickened and the acrid smell of lamp smoke grew heavier as they advanced. Their footsteps echoed hollowly from the black and stagnant pools through which they sloshed in the hollows of the narrow car tracks gleaming dully in the dim, flaring light of their lamps. From somewhere ahead came the multiplied, regular, biting ring of steel on steel as the drills were driven in, and to right or left at intervals, the rich, dark breasts led steeply up into the denser blackness ending in an orange glow of moving lights where the men were toiling.

From behind a turn in the rock entry came the rich bellowing of a big voice, reminiscent of the night just gone:

"*Yas*, Lawd! *Yas*, Lawd! De moon am ridin' high—"

"Where is your boss? Where is Gallway?" asked Parry, abruptly halting the black giant who rounded the turn of the rock before them.

"Dunno, Boss. Airlie Washn'n, he done smashed he foot, first thing this mohnin', an' de boss, he done taken him up lift to he cabin, mebbe," the negro answered, with a wide and high-keyed laugh. "Boss, he ain't done come back no moh, yit."

"Clymer, run back and go up with the cage! Find Gallway, the foreman. Tell him I want him here at once!" And Clymer ran.

"Did Mr. Gallway tell you all to keep out of Robson's breast to-day?" Parry asked anxiously, turning again to the negro.

"Yas, Boss. He done did. Ah 'm Robson, an' we jes' done packed three holes that we-all drilled yist'dy, up in de peak, an' tha 's all we gwine shoot up thah to-day. You-all white men betteh stay right heah, Boss, till she goes! They 's about to fiah!"

"No!" shouted Parry, as a vision of the sullen, waiting water-fiend above them passed before his mind in an instant review of the old drawings. "Stop it! Stop it, do you hear?" he insisted, clutching at the bared arm of the man, who stood staring in stupid wonder.

"Fiah in de ga—ang-a-way!" rang a distant voice, and, instantly, black men came scurrying, jostling, laughing around the rough projection of rocks in the main entry and crouched, waiting, in the sheltered places.

"Stop it, Robson!" again cried Parry, starting forward along the gangway. His voice was swept away with a quivering shock.

"Boom! Boom!! Boom!!!" came the dull answer, crashing and echoing in quick repetitions from the blackness just ahead and upward, while Parry and Barstow, the latter but half understanding the full meaning of it all, were swept unresistingly into the nearest breast entry by the heavy arms of Robson, who now crouched grinning there in the flaring light of the lamps.

Then, suddenly, there rose, shrill, piercing, agonizing, the supreme cry of a man in mortal terror, and a babble of voices that rang for a moment in changing shades of horror. It ended in the gurgling, awful sounds of men throttled to sudden death in a weight of rushing waters, and a current of fetid air rushed along the drift, increasing in its furious blast until it sighed and moaned past the low arch of the breast within which Parry and the others were huddled.

"Up the breasts!" he shouted. "Every man up the breasts for his life!" and, even as they turned to clamber up the steep and slippery face of the breast, a mine car, a tangled mass of twisted rails, a sodden clutter of tumbling, wide-eyed, clutching men, a mule struggling feet upward swept past the low breast arch, and close after this living catapult — a part of it — came a black and stinking flood, gorging the gangway, leaping in a torrent through the arch of the breast, and tearing savagely at their slipping feet as they struggled upward.

Shortly, it was done and they sat high up in the darkness, upon a narrow level in the blind pocket of the earth, gasping with the pressure of air about them, their heads ringing, lights swept out, the blackness thick and damp and heavy as a sodden pall. No one spoke, for a time. The mind could not grasp it just yet. Sight was gone, senses dulled, and brains throbbed, to each man according to his capacity, with a supreme sense of merely having been. This could not be a thing in life! And then a negro moaned and struck a match!

Parry and Barstow faced one another dumbly for a moment, in the dull light that then flared from the man's lamp. "Seven!" said Parry, at last, when he had looked round upon the wide, white eyes and terror-stricken faces, making quick and careful count of the cowering group.

Fifty feet down the steep face of the breast, the black, festering waters were now quietly stirring, swelling, receding in soft settling calm, as of a foe that, having no further need for haste, will bide his time. The entrance was sealed deep down below that softly stirring flood.

"Five — and us!" responded Barstow, in brief accord, and spat abstractedly at the swelling gleams below.

"Put it out! Don't burn this air!" Parry commanded the man with the light, and the man, hugging closer a battered and dripping dinner-pail which he held, laughed hysterically and blew the light out.

"Ah want mah dinnah-pail! Tha 's mine!" wailed a voice in the heavy air. Yet, in the voice was the latent note of menace not yet free of fright.

"I 'll keep it for you! Hand it over, man with the lamp!" Parry's voice rang out quickly, and the man came shuffling toward him in the blackness. "And the lamp!" said Parry.

The man delivered them without a protest and shambled away to the others. Thus, establishing the supremacy which, later, was so vital they sat them down to wait, with the white men in command.

High above, in the sunshine, the solemn word had gone forth swiftly on the heels of Clymer. The negroes had suddenly changed their morning chant of joy in life to a moaning, shrilling plaint of woe. The sun peering brightly over the eastern crest, lighted the canyon gayly as for a winter *fiesta*, tipped the snow-clad ridges and gables of the squalid cabins with brilliant, glinting spears of white and mocked the terror-stricken stragglers in their weeping flight to the shaft-house. Clymer, after one despairing look at the unfinished telephone line, just making its way into Harmony camp, had unhooked a mule from the dump, and was galloping down the canyon toward Villa Rica and Stoner, while the ventilating fan droned futilely on and the big pumps, urged to sudden haste, were bellowing and vomiting forth their double burden of blackened waters.

Twice, Gallway went down with the cage and a man or two who had remained above; walked the short descending slope of the main gangway to where the sullen water barred the further advance and swelled and lapped gently at its victims lying there face-downward, bedraggled and still. Twice, he came up with the cage and its silent burden. Twice, the agonized wailing of them that cowered round the shaft-house rose to a shriller note of woe as the cage gave up its load, and then they in the sunshine above could only wait the pleasure of the waters and the pumps, even as the prisoned ones in the cold darkness below.

Presently, the morning gathering at the tank bench in

Villa Rica was abruptly broken up by the passing of the fleeing mule, and soon afterward Stoner was listening, in tense silence, to the breathless tale of Clymer.

Stoner was a man of action. To Clymer, he said:

"Ride back and do what you can for Gallway! Tell him we are coming with help!"

To Dinwiddy, the master mechanic, he said:

"Give me an engine and crew, and twelve men from the shops who can rig a pump and fittings — rig them to the bottomless pit, if need be! *Men,* Dinwiddy! You know the kind!

"Load a car of pipe to suit and cut out that car from the west-bound local that 's carrying the big pump and fittings. We will run them all up the canyon with that engine standing at the coal chutes! I 'm getting orders from Balceta to cover this levy. Can you come along, Dinwiddy?"

"Yes," replied Dinwiddy. And then: "Enderby! McPeltrie! it 's your engine! Take us up. You can run back in time for your regular trip. It will count an extra trip's pay for you."

"I want no pay for this!" said Enderby, turning at once toward the engine.

"Nor me!" said McPeltrie, following him.

"I should have known that — did know it," replied Dinwiddy in quick accord.

Soon, the metallic clangor of rapidly loading pipe ceased at the shops, the yard engine shunted the car of men and materials down against the diverted car of pump and fittings, and, coupled to the conscripted road engine, the little train steamed away up the canyon, as Stoner and Waverly, the conductor hastily drafted, ran out from the despatcher's office and climbed aboard the engine with the promised orders. Dinwiddy waved a silent farewell in response to the wavering cluster of hands that rose for a moment at the roundhouse door, then he turned to the machinists upon the car, to map out with them in low-voiced earnestness the campaign at hand, against the water of the mine.

In the day and night that followed, Mrs. Enderby and Ruth were Mrs. Parry's tireless comforters in Villa Rica, while, at the mine, Dinwiddy and his "boys" did deeds of valor and endurance worthy of any field of glory. When another sun arose above the mountain, the new pump was coupled in and adding its sharp, quick barking to the slower pulsing of the older pumps. The black current that hurried gurgling down the canyon was doubled in its flow, and yet Stoner and Gallway, anxiously marking the slow recession of the water in the slight slope from the bottom of the shaft, could only say to those waiting above:

"Pump! Wait!"

A day, another, four days went by, and still their shouting advances from the bottom of the shaft to where the water in the slope wedged them against the roof-rock brought no answering call from the men hemmed in below. The little group, securely sealed high in the blackness, gave no sign or sound of life, but grimly they were waiting there, counting the slowly receding inches of water at the foot of the breast, searching the rock for a thinness, listening to the dull shock of the pumps in the water, and holding to the waning spark of life as best they might.

For those four days, Parry had parcelled out a few crumbs of corn bread and a shred of stale meat from the lone dinner-pail, apportioning impartially his measure to each, and each time Barstow had swallowed but a scant fragment and passed his portion back to Parry as the brief light was extinguished, mumbling:

"You-all jest eat that, Mr. Parry. 'T ain't like as if you was chewin' your tobacco regular, like me!"

And Parry, protesting, had quietly returned the food to the pail each time in the darkness and, next day, portioned it out again with the fast waning store.

Now all food was gone and they had drunk from the drip of the rocks and huddled down again in hunger and cold too painful for sleep, until the lines of white and black, of master and man, were strained to breaking, and half-delirious mutterings came constantly from the darker group, which still instinctively separated itself a space from Parry and Barstow. The bare question of survival was coming more strongly uppermost and pressing for an answer.

At last, it broke forth in an agonized cry of rage and suffering and Parry knew that the crisis had come!

"Whah foh white men mek us colo'ed people come in heah? Whah foh mah dinnah-pail gone? Ah want mah pail!" shouted a voice strong in the fever of hunger.

"Ah want mah lamp!" bellowed another in the close silence. "Whah foh we set in de dahk? Ah 'm a-chillin', Ah am! Ah want mah lamp!"

"Seh down, yo' blue-gum niggahs!" roared the voice of Robson, and the hissing shuffle of damp clothing in the darkness told of his painful rise to his feet between the two groups.

"Seh down! Lay down!" commanded Robson valiantly, but a quaver of hunger-smitten weakness trembled in his voice, and Barstow, catching the half-note of fear, also labored heavily to his feet. Stepping before the niche in which Parry sat braced against the rock, Barstow silently unslung the hand-axe from his belt, snapped its folding handle into place, and waited.

"Haw, yo' Robson!" jeered the first speaker. "Whah foh yo' tip yoh hat dese white men, yist'dy? This heah ain't down souf!"

"Ah jus' could n't hep it," replied Robson. "Seh down!"

"This heah 's free out heah! Black man 's good as white! Gi 'm mah pail!" the other insisted, as the stirring rustle increased.

"Lay down!" commanded Robson, and his voice broke with the sound of a dull impact.

The sickening thud of naked flesh upon flesh, the swirling and scuffling of bodies, and the snarling yelps of men hard hit told that the battle was fully on, and the thick air stirred and reeked with the struggle.

"Stop it!" shouted Parry weakly struggling to his feet. He lighted the lamp and in the dim light saw Robson downed and battling in a tangle of three others. Then, over the writhing mass of them, the claimant of the pail leaped toward the light, with arm upraised to strike!

Barstow struck him full in the chest with the flat of the axe, but failed to stay his coming. The man's big fist grazed Parry's head and crunched dully against the rock, while Barstow, striking again, in his weakness, missed, reeled, and fell headlong down the glistening incline of the breast and sank in a wide wash of the foul waters at its foot.

Turning with a howl of rage and pain, the negro stood staring into the black waters below and, in that instant, Parry struck him down, senseless, upon the weltering heap of men upon the ledge.

"Stop it, men!" Parry commanded again, and the diversion of Barstow's sudden going, with the falling of the senseless one in their midst, made the order hold.

They dragged the fallen one aside and, with many painful flounderings, Robson led the others down the slippery way to the rescue of Barstow. When they had dragged him out half senseless, Robson drove them with their burden, gasping, up to the ledge again. With the light out, they all sank down again to wait.

The week dragged through its remaining, endless hours, with the pumps working double and Stoner, Gallway, and Clymer probing, testing, feeling their perilous way in the thick air and the softened workings, while those in the blind pocket could only drowse and turn, moaning, and drowse again. But the waters were sinking, and when at last the raft bearing the rescuers was forced close above the arch of the imprisoning breast Gallway scanned the wall as one might search the face of a deadly enemy, and said:

" It 's here, Mr. Stoner, that the boy says they stood when he ran back. I reason that they got no farther into the mine and if they are here it 's to be quick work if we help them at this late day. I can break an opening in a quarter-hour," he said, thrusting a barbed drill against the softened face, " but, if they still live, a minute may be a life to them now! I 'll dive for it!" he finished quickly, dropping the drill and reaching for a canteen of broth.

" I 'll go! " spoke Clymer, shedding jacket and boots.

" Not you! " said Gallway. " You are a good lad, but it 's man's work. Stand by to hold the raft against the back wall! "

" Steady, Gallway! " admonished Stoner, who had rapidly measured Clymer's wiry young body at a glance. " Run a line under his arms, give him the broth canteen, and let him try. A minute will tell and you will be needed here."

It was quickly arranged, and when Clymer had buttoned the canteen of weak broth securely within his blouse and received a simple code of rope signals, with Gallway's exact description of the arch of the breast entrance, they balanced the raft against Clymer's coming plunge, and he stepped to its edge.

"I know how it looks down there," he said. "Good-bye!" and dived deep into the oily waters.

The line ran swiftly out from the coil upon the raft, tightened, swayed, slackened, and hung limply in the water, while Stoner and Gallway breathed short and hard, gazing at the spot where Clymer sank. Then the line ran tense again, and Stoner saw Gallway's hands yield forward to the stress of three steady pulls from below.

"He is in!" said Gallway, with an answering draw upon the line. But, it straightened hard and fast in his grasp and no further signal came from within the breast.

Clymer, thrusting aside the chilly, yielding things that floated upon the still pool within, was breathing the deadly air of a charnel-house in which there was no sound but the lapping of the waters stirred by his coming. With a few strong strokes, he had gained the foot of the incline, and lay there calling upward into the darkness as he clutched the rock:

"Mr. Parry! Barstow!" he called without answer. "Robson!" he shouted desperately, and from above the voice of Robson answered thickly:

"Yas, Lawd!" it muttered and ended in a moan.

Struggling out upon the face of the breast, Clymer threw himself free of the line, fastened it to the rock, and slipping the seal from his midget flash-lamp, followed its dancing ray quickly, to the ledge at the top of the breast. Fearing to fan too strongly the feeble sparks of life that hovered in Parry's poor, quiet company, he silently lifted the lolling heads and moistened the swollen throats from the canteen until all had proven their slender hold of life. Then, kneeling close beside Parry, he chafed and coaxed him back to consciousness, saying over and over again:

"Come, Parry, come! We 're going home. Home!"

When Parry understood it in some measure Clymer thrust the canteen into his hand and dinned into his dull ear:

"Only a little of this, Parry! Only a little, and wait! We 're going home!"

Then he scrambled down the breast, fastened the line about him, and as Gallway, stripping off his boots upon the raft, was poising for a dive to break the unbearable suspense, Stoner felt two strong pulls upon the line and cried:

"Hold, Gallway! He is coming out!"

"Seven! All living! But, hurry! Hurry! Break down the arch!" gasped Clymer, as his face came above the water in the gangway a few moments later.

In that way it came about that, on that seventh day, the long-sealed breast sighed foully into the open air of the gangway, the slender raft of mine timbers began its several sorry ferryings along the slope, and the cage came up with its only living salvage from the flood, as the sun was riding low behind the mountain. That evening, Enderby dropped his engine and a coach attached slowly down the canyon, bearing John Parry and his wife upon the second of their eventful journeyings with Enderby. There were others in that coach, as stricken as they, but Enderby's mind was leaping the far gap to that other, fairer day, and he thought chiefly of Parry, as the engine felt its way carefully down to Villa Rica.

The snows were gone and a softer light was upon the high country, when Parry first ventured up the canyon again, on parole from Villa Rica hospital. The pumps, meanwhile, had mastered their work, and brattice and props were fast replacing the crumbled workings in the mine. Soon, he would take up the charge again and the cutting of the black rock would resume.

Looking up to the lip of the cliff above the canyon, an involuntary shudder swept his weakened body as his eyes fell upon a blanketed and hooded figure that sat high in the enticing sunlight. Now and then, it stirred restlessly, as though looking in terror upon the scene below, but ventured upon no nearer approach.

Yielding to an impulse, Parry began laboring slowly upward toward the lonely figure upon the cliff. Sinking down weakly at last, upon the gnarled cedar root, he sat beside the man in silence for a time. Presently he asked:

" How were you able to say, Camargo, that the great trouble was so near at hand? "

Camargo, huddling deeper in his blanket, answered:

" My father was a dreamer of dreams. I am his son! Upon this crag many voices have spoken! I am an old man. Yes, very old!

" Go no more into The Fires of Sorrow, *señor.* The gods will destroy! "

Such is the perverseness and persistency of the white man, however, that Parry, grown stronger, went again into the depths, and penetrating the older mine that had done its worst, found the wasted shapes of Camargo's poor people mouldering there; found, also, the richest workings of them all. Therefore, Stoner was called upon no further to explain output decreased, or disaster invited.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MODERN MAZEPPA

THE balance of railroad power and importance had rested quite evenly between Villa Rica and Alta Vista, while for several years they had been regarded as rival division points, in a friendly sort of way. But the great railroad machine for the making of transportation was growing more complex in its construction, more insistent in its requirements, and a closer centralization was becoming necessary.

With the coming of still heavier engines and rolling-stock, and the establishment of Flyers, the balance of power definitely settled upon Alta Vista. With it went Bunnel, Dinwiddy, Enderby, Dodson, McPeltrie, and many others from Villa Rica, to re-locate in Alta Vista. It was really a sort of home-coming to some of them who had known the latter place as home for many years after it had been dropped there in the high barrens like a bit of beautiful, dull mosaic on the march of the railroad through the mountains.

Doc. Maxon, however, called it "the year of the Hegira," as he jovially welcomed them all to Alta Vista, and Abe Hazard liked the gritty sound of it so well that, without stopping to inquire too far into the exact application of the term, he named his infant daughter, who was born upon the day of the numerous arrivals, "Hegira Maxon Hazard." Which, if it did not, later, prove a heritage of joy to the very young lady, was a source of instant pride to Maxon.

The considerable stir of the important changes had subsided into the town's regular life and Dinwiddy and Enderby had resumed their friendly habit of dropping into the despatcher's office of an evening, when nothing seemed to forbid. An evening in June found them there, sitting, smoking, upon the opposite corners of the only unoccupied table, listening, meanwhile, to the insistent clamor of the sounders, which neither of them understood.

The none too brilliant oil lights shone yellowly under a level stratum of tobacco smoke that hung above the heads of Bunnel and his corps of operators, while they labored tensely over instrument, book, and train-sheet. Outside, the summer rain swept in pulsing gusts around the low upper story, drenching the windows with fitful floods, through which Bunnel's lights glowed bravely but made little impress upon the blackness of the night.

On the train-sheet, several columns of train-records were creeping up steadily, and others, as steadily were creeping down. Some of these columns had, even then, met in parallel, and, overlapping each other, showed that, for them, all was going well. Waverly, with Muller and Johnson, double-heading, was lagging some, it is true. There was too, a little snarl at Jupiter, but that was solving itself in a saw-by. Bunnel and his aides were, taking it all in all, feeling the quiet but intense joy of their craft, and except for an occasional muttered exclamation, the room was empty of speech. Still, the proper moment of relaxation, which seemed near, had not yet arrived, and they hung closely above their work. Then, the clatter of the sounders wholly ceased for a few moments, and in that silence, Dinwiddy, who had grown restive, spoke:

"Come away, Pap," said he, grasping Enderby's arm.

"This is the only place on a railroad that makes a motive-power man look like a rank fakir!

"One of these fellows says 'Keno!' and another says 'Scat!' and nobody knows what they are talking about but themselves. Come on over to the roundhouse a while, where they talk our language."

Two or three matches snapped in concert and as many operators faced about, laughingly, while they relighted their neglected pipes and chorused: "Stay! We are on velvet, now!"

A slow smile was just replacing the intent look that had set upon Bunnel's face until he turned to nod his approval of the general invitation. At that moment, a renewed clatter broke from the wire, and lifting his hand swiftly for attention, his voice ringing out in the sense of habitual authority, he spoke the word that was balancing upon his tongue, in a way quite different from its first intent.

"Stay!" he commanded, and hung low and intently above the instruments.

With tightening pulses, Enderby and Dinwiddy settled back upon the vacant table. The operators tossed aside the still-flaming matches with their relighted pipes and listened to the cramped and fitful story the wire was telling.

It was seconds only, but an age of them to those who waited, before Bunnel spoke:

"Quick, Dinwiddy! Muller 's in a mix-up in Saddler Canyon. Somebody — 'Red Jones,' he signed — cut in with a relay there, but he broke and has quit sending. Call the wreck-crew with your roundhouse whistle and let Enderby run them down. I 'll give you orders in five minutes, and a clear line to Jupiter!"

The big roundhouse whistle bellowed hoarsely into the night and shadowy figures came running from home, from night task, and from the various relaxations of the town, donning storm coats as they ran. Ten minutes later, the short, sinister train with its looming derrick and square-jawed, clear-eyed crew of veterans was curving and swinging out of the yards in the wake of Enderby's engine lights, while McPeltrie, coaxing the fire to a fiercer whiteness, had not, as yet, received a satisfactory reply to his hurried question at starting: "What 's it all about, Pap?"

It was many days indeed, before that question was fully answered, and of the many answers perhaps Muller's own answer to Doc. Maxon was most complete when, finally, he gave it. Muller moved down off the mountain when he got out of the hospital, and began his recuperation in Saddler River Valley, where he and Jim Dodson had long maintained, side by side, a modest summer cottage apiece, within sound of the river's peaceful flowing. He had been discharged from the service, but aside from that he could not then endure the effect of altitude at Alta Vista.

Dan Muller, in many ways, filled the large measure of a man. He was one of many technically educated men who dare, early, to clip the wings of a too lofty ambition and thereby run a chosen course of usefulness within the honorable middle-ground of success. He had done this, knowing that, while there may always be room at the proverbial and elusive top, it is always deadly cold and, sometimes, very lonely there, if the top is of very great height.

Therefore, he had clung to his engine-running, for the love of it, and when he made his one fatal error, the hearts of Alta Vista folks who fully understood followed him achingly into his banishment. They had threshed it out among themselves, in surmise and argument, but Muller, who alone knew the whole of it, had spoken little, even at the hearing which ended in his discharge. One thing was patent to them all: The same thing might have fallen upon any one of them, under similar circumstances, and, knowing Muller, they knew that he was suffering beyond his deserts.

Enderby, searching his soul for a way to hasten Muller's healing, met Doc. Maxon at the drug-store corner one morning, just after Dodson's report from Muller's home was darkest. Then, Enderby had a sure and clear inspiration.

" Maxon," said he, " when did you see Muller? "

" Been weeks since I saw him," replied Maxon briefly. " Nothing much there for me to do, now. Time, time, Enderby, for a hurt like that. He won't talk. I tried that."

" That 's it! " said Enderby eagerly. " You 've said it, Doc., but he 's got to talk! That 's what I want to say to you. I want you to get on my train this morning and go down there to see him. Make him talk. Lead him to it. Take him back to the school days, if you must — you were college mates, he told me one day — and lead him to it. Get it out of him, or he 'll die there fighting it out with himself.

" He 's trying to purge himself of the blood of Waverly, near as I can make out from the little that Dodson says, whereas, all the time, that big soul of his is as clean as — as *soap*, by mighty! " declared Enderby, tumbling precipitately from his flight in search of something that might aptly fill, to running over, the measure of his respect for Muller.

Maxon went, and that evening he sat with Muller and the latter's wife at the cottage, in the soft dusk of the valley. The little Saddler River purled down musically out of the canyon, and fire-flies flitted among the blueflags, flashing endless messages in their brilliant code. A whip-poor-will called patiently from the shadowy grove beyond the stream, and crickets in the dew-laden grass chirped "Peace, peace, peace." Now and then, a breath came up from the meadow and softly rustled the branches of a big sweetbrier against the lattice of the veranda, and wafted the insistent spicy odor of its pink blooms upon them. Under Maxon's careful leading, they had been speaking of courage.

"Men may go down to death rejoicing," said Muller, "where there is the stimulus of effort, and a chance to live. They may do it, but it does not accord with my observation of normal men, when pitted against a certainty. When a man is fast, with death closing in upon him; or when he is being hurled helplessly to meet death's rushing advance, the animal courage of him is likely to ebb away, just as it deserts a trapped animal at the last, and he is apt to sink to his fate dully, as the animal lowers its head and meekly receives the cudgel or the axe.

"Would you care if we sat at the upper end of the veranda? The wild rose odor overcomes me, at times, since the night in Saddler Canyon. And yet, I cannot decide to remove the bush. It fascinates me like the beauty of a rattlesnake."

They grouped themselves to windward of the rose bush. When they were again seated, Muller's wife lifted his twisted and helpless left hand and pressed it silently to her soft cheek, then clasped its unnaturally smooth surface in her own firm hands and dropped them gently to her lap. She gazed, for a moment, into his seared, sad face, and then, with abstracted and sorrowful eyes, out into the peaceful night.

"Muller," said Maxon, when it became apparent that both of them were brooding ruinously, "could you tell me of that night? It helps matters sometimes, just in the telling."

Just then Dan, their little son, a small replica of the handsome thoroughbred that Muller once was, came charging through the wide hall, with a burst of joyous laughter. He was in full pursuit of a black kitten, which he treed and captured, in noisy victory, upon the sweetbrier bush. As he romped to his father's knee with the captive, Muller ran his good hand caressingly through the boy's hair and said: "We think this is the greatest help we have now, Doctor, but maybe you are right.

"Danny, would you like to play over at Willie Dodson's for half an hour? Very well. Go, but do not stay longer than that."

"Good-bye, son," said his mother.

"Good-bye," he chirruped in reply.

When the little fellow had flitted across the lawn and sounds of childish glee came back with the clatter of some metal toy, Muller said:

"I will tell you of it, Maxon, but I do not want the boy to absorb ideas of the heroic side of engine-running. My part in this affair was not of the heroic; but I have given enough. Him I will not give."

Maxon saw Lucy's fingers close tighter upon Muller's hand at this, and they sat quietly for a little space.

"Do they understand, the body of the people," he asked impersonally, "what this vague commodity that is called 'transportation' costs in brains and blood and human suffering? It must be that they do not, or a great human cry would go up against the unreasonable haste that we affect.

"The cost is too great; the steady, daily, almost hourly, exaction of the pound of flesh that lies nearest to the heart of the nation. And yet, the deadly fascination of the business is such that, if a miracle were wrought and my shrivelled arm became whole to-night, I suppose I should be looking toward the tracks again to-morrow."

Except for a nod of assent, Maxon left him to find his own way back to the event. The drawn look was leaving his face, and this substitution of thought for action, a vicarious return to usefulness, was doing him good, as Maxon had hoped.

"Twice a week, Seven left Chicago at the same time that Eight left San Francisco; far more disturbing to us than if they had run daily. Each train had its half-million-dollar equipment of swift and heavy engine, bath, barber-shop, staterooms, dining-room, library — elongated hotels, in fact, running to meet one another, until they came together and passed in the night, at the crest of the High Divide on our division. You knew all that, perhaps, but you cannot, without living it, know the feel of heading one of them, speeding down the line, or of meeting and passing it in the night. So, bear with me, Maxon. Having begun, I must tell it in my own way.

"It was all right for us as long as they were on the other divisions, but when they came in off of the Mojave Desert at one end and out of Kansas at the other, and like shear-blades closed quickly down upon the time of our divisions, it was exacting business for the trains that were running between them. The night that trouble came in the canyon was one of the nights on which Seven and Eight ran.

"We left Villa Rica, where our train was made up, and started on our hundred-mile run east through the mountains. We had orders to meet three other freight trains and we knew that they would wait at Jupiter until Number Seven overtook and passed them, and that they would then follow her down into the canyon.

"We had signed the usual order at Villa Rica, about the two limited trains, reading: 'We understand that trains Seven and Eight run to-night.' For the rest of it, we had our time-card; and it meant 'keep out of the way,' even if we had to carry the train on our backs and climb a tree with it, as Waverly used to say. No excuses taken, you know.

"Eight had overtaken and passed us at the first siding beyond Villa Rica yard and we figured to get in out of the way of coming Seven at Saddler's. We had fifty cars of California fruit, with two big consolidation engines coupled at the front, double-heading. Rock-a-by Johnson's engine had the train. It was his regular run, but I was called to run the head engine, and I took the run to help Dinwiddy out and to get me back on my passenger run out of Alta Vista.

"That train make-up don't sound very big to a river-grade man, but to a mountain man it is crime. It was raining when we left Villa Rica, at eight in the evening, and it rained all night. At nine we were at Selkirk, twenty miles east, and should have run the ten miles ahead, into the canyon and to Saddler's siding in the east end of it, in twenty minutes. But, there was trouble from the time we went into the canyon until the end came.

"There are many curves there, and at every curve the wet couplings slipped over each other alarmingly. Several times the train parted, but we avoided collision of the parts. With draw-bars pulled out and the half-dozen or more break-in-twos of that ten miles, we were an hour and a half at it, and had not reached Saddler's.

"The last break-in-two came at a little crest, 'The Half-Way Knob,' between Selkirk and Saddler's. It was getting close on Number Seven's time, and poor Waverly — conductor, you know,— all crippled up with rheumatism, came running painfully to the front and told Red Bill Jones, the brakeman, to cut me off with the head engine, and run the four miles to Saddler's, and flag Number Seven. It 's all single track down there, and he told Jones to stay at Saddler's siding and hold Number Seven a week, if they — Waverly and Johnson — did not show up there with the fruit train. We were sure to delay Seven, and the only thing left to do was to make the delay short as possible and, above all, keep them from hitting us, head-on.

" I ran those four miles as fast as the small-wheeled freight engine could safely go, and dropped the brakeman at the west whistling-post and told him to walk to Saddler's. That made us safe as a trundle bed, against Seven, and I reversed, at once, and ran back to couple on again, ahead of Johnson. They had been trying to couple up the train when I left, and I went back hard, expecting to help handle the train over the Knob, and so cut Seven's delay down as low as I could. We were all proud of those limited trains and it was rated shameful to delay them a minute. Besides that, it was just about all your job was worth.

" Once over the Knob, it was all down-grade to Saddler's for Johnson with the train. Half-way between those points is a sharp reverse curve in a rock-cut, and the track borders the river. It is the deepest part of the canyon, where a great palisade of dull red and gray and green rock rises, and the shelf-rock, on the mountain-side, runs out to the level of the cab windows; so close that you could toss your cap upon it while passing, and a mere line of boulders and low standing rock is between the track and the river. I was running back plenty fast enough when my engine roared over the single-span bridge and curved into the cut.

" I hit them there, Maxon — God help me to forget!

" I hit them, or they hit me, and killed poor Waverly;

ground him up in the splintered timbers and trucks, and crippled Johnson and his fireman, and piled the cut and the narrow river full, with Johnson's engine, cars, telegraph wires, poles, and fruit."

Muller's wife was crying softly and now pleaded, "Don't go on, Dan. You are not strong enough to talk so much of these things."

"I 've got to tell it, Lucy! It is burning the soul out of me," said Muller brokenly.

"You see," he continued, when he had regained his control, "there is so much to remember and to do. In most of the affairs of life, mistakes can be corrected; a little lapse of thought; a little extra weariness; a little error of judgment; a little thing undone. But, with us, it is final and complete. There is no recall, no sufficient extenuation.

"We had no understanding between us, Johnson and I, and Waverly was so worried with the way things were going, and he was suffering so much in the rain with his rheumatism, that he forgot to cover that point — which engine should wait — just as we did. I take it that Johnson, as well as I, had no idea they could couple up and come ahead before I got back to help. Then, oh, we all missed a point. One point!

"They got the train coupled, and were running hard for Saddler's, while I ran back hard to get to them. I set my brakes fully with one sweep of the hand, when I heard them coming, but the crash was frightful when we met. My fireman jumped into the river, a breath or two before we struck, and he got away safely, but I fared worse, as you see.

"While Waverly's last cry was yet ringing out above the grinding din, the tender was wrenched loose from my engine and hurled upward and over into the river. It, and the coal,

Harnden Foster 1910.

"I hit them there, Maxon — God help me to forget!"

struck the steel engine cab and crumpled it partly down upon me. The trucks of the tender ran under the engine's deck, broke off both brake-cylinders, and tore the reverse lever loose from the fulcrum, below. The throttle was open when we struck and the crumpled steel of the cab bent the stem in the gland, so that the valve could not be closed. My foot was crushed and held at the ankle under the displaced quadrant, and from the first made me wild with pain.

"The reversing links dropped to full go-ahead position when the lever broke loose, and with the brake-cylinders gone, the brakes were released. I knew the full meaning of it when the wheels of my engine began to spin and slip under me, but I could do nothing. While she stood for a few moments thrashing the track furiously with her flattened driving-wheels, I hoped that the truck or the rods might break under the strain and end it all there, and pass me out with Waverly, but save Seven. But the wheels took hold and the engine dragged free from the pile of debris that hung upon the crumpled cab. Twice again she roared and slipped and then I was dashing back crazily through the canyon, toward Saddler's, pinned fast in the tenderless engine and, even then, ten minutes on Number Seven's time.

"I knew that if I passed the switch and Red Jones, the flagman, I must run fair into the face of Seven coming down-grade from Jupiter, speeding to make up her lost time. I tried to reach the swinging handle of the whistle-cord, to sound the long call and have Jones ditch me at the switch, to give Seven and me one chance for life. But the handle, in its widest sweeps, dangled just at the ends of my finger-tips and my crushed foot would not yield a bit farther toward it. I had pulled Seven often and knew what she could do to me, but I am proud that I was able then to think more of what she would do to herself and her people; that took almost the last of my strength.

"My engine seemed to be leaping the two miles of straight track, to where Jones, dumbfounded, stood wildly waving his red lamp when he heard the choking exhaust and saw, too late, that I was not stopping. Then I heard his frantic shout and saw him hurl his red lantern as the engine roared and careened close upon him. Steam from the broken air-pump throttle was scalding the life out of me and flying in clouds from the cab windows, but I saw that his aim was true. Through a rift in the vapor I saw the red globe shatter upon the boiler in a burst of ruby fragments, before its exposed, yellow flame snuffed out and left only the dim headlight again showing, but hardly penetrating, the dripping darkness.

"It was just then that the keen perfume of a wild-rose bush came up to me upon a swirl of cool wet air that cut into the steam cloud as I raced past a thicket by the river. It was like a farewell breath of life then, and now the odor turns me deathly sick if I get too much of it.

"Plunging on in despair through the rain and darkness of the eight miles of curves and grades alternately climbing and sagging over the buttes toward Jupiter, I pictured the three freights standing high at Jupiter with headlights covered, and Number Seven rushing up among the lower buttes on the Jupiter side of the high crest that hid them all from me; then I fancied her rain-washed electric headlight with its long trail of lighted car windows, stabbing the gloom and shooting like a meteor through the black night and across the last flat in a final flight to gain the ridge at Jupiter and dart down upon me.

“At every turn of the driving-wheels, which were flattened when I set the brakes at the wreck, the shock of the flat spots jarred through the engine and my trapped foot took up the beat of it agonizingly. To my strained senses, the recurrent shock took on the measure of a horse’s galloping stride and I could not rid myself of the thought of Mazeppa, lashed to the back of the wild horse.

“I thought of you, Maxon, and how, as youngsters, we argued the human right and wrong of that tale, when we were in school at old New Haven. I have only this little woman who is the good mother of my son, and they have made me prince of our little kingdom. I would be monarch of no other. I have never cherished revenge, but the hateful fancy that I galloped on and on across the waste places would not leave me. A drove of half-wild horses huddled upon the track, with heads drooped together and tails turned to the then pelting storm as the engine dashed out of the canyon, climbed over the first crest beyond Saddler’s, and rushed at them. They broke and fled in terror through the night and I seemed to pursue them on my galloping engine. The steam was parboiling me, and my body, pivoting upon my broken ankle, was tossed and bruised constantly; now upon the boiler-head and now half out of the cab window while the speed-wind was whipping and roaring around the battered cab and clutching at me with rough graspings that seared my raw flesh like fire.

“Only a few minutes had passed but every second of them belonged to Number Seven, and yet I ran on without meeting her. Soon, the heavy exhaust began tearing the fire from the grates and sending it in jets and volleys from the stack. The steam pressure began to fail and as the successive ridges were climbed at a slower rate I sickened again with brief returning hope; but, even then, the engine held a deadly pace.

" When I went over the last rise and into the deep sag that lies just west of the high crest near Jupiter, my engine raced down the grade with greatest speed and ran up the other side almost to the top of Jupiter crest. But the up-grade rapidly sapped her. She went slower, slower, until, for a moment, I hoped again, but quickly remembered that nothing stood between me and Seven. With a long-drawn gasp from the stack she stopped just before my headlight could show to them over the crest, and began to creep back down the grade, with the steam contesting every slow turn of the wheels and snorting short protests from the stack. Sometimes she came to a full stand and later advanced a half-turn as the steam gathered in the cylinders. But, each time she dropped a little farther back at the next exhaust, and finally stood in the lowest spot of that hollow in the hills and held me waiting for the end.

" It is strange how one's mind, in his last extremity, harks far back along the way he has come. When the shimmering white shaft from Number Seven's headlight shot over the crest and focussed down upon me I know I looked dully through rifts of steam at the sparkling curtain of falling rain, and repeated the simple little prayer that my mother taught me, when I was less than the age of our boy, and —"

" Oh, don't, Daniel! Don't, *don't!* " said his wife, and buried her white face upon his breast.

" Don't, Muller," Maxon gently added. " It is enough, is it not? "

After he had passed his free hand slowly to and fro upon his wife's dark hair until her shoulders ceased to heave, Muller said steadily:

"I will finish it, once for all. That is best.

"The spear of light from Jim Dodson's engine on Seven wavered and gleamed as the engine rocked upon the hill-top, leaving me one moment in the bright glare and the next in deep blackness cut only by my own feeble headlight. Again and again, his headlight glared steadily upon me or suddenly leaped aside into the desert, telling of quick lurches at speed. Knowing it futile, I called once upon Dodson to stop, but I might as well have cried against the desert wind; and I say I knew it, Doctor.

"When, finally, through a rift in the steam that enveloped me, his headlight steadied down upon me and the dark bulk of his engine loomed behind it, I saw the play of moving side-rods and shut my eyes in the cloud of steam which again drifted into my face.

"In the next moment I was looking down into Dodson's smudged, white face below my cab window, where he was scrambling up over the rock ballast and calling: 'Muller! Muller! What happened? How did you get here?'

"In the great reaction of knowing that he was not going to crush me, his rain-streaked face and the water dripping from the visor of his cap seemed to me a welcome jest and I tried to laugh, but my face was stiff as clay. It was about a week, they say, before I knew anything more of it, and then Dodson was sitting beside my cot in Villa Rica hospital. He told me piecemeal, while I was mending, that the three freights, longer than the siding at Jupiter, had delayed him that night, 'sawing by' them. When he shut off steam and tipped over the crest, drifting down from Jupiter, he saw my headlight burning feebly in the white lane which his electric light cut into the darkness, but just at first he thought it a track-walker's lantern and came on. As my light did not move, he stopped short; then dropped down slowly toward me with his train.

"Where I believed his train had straightened and steadied the light upon me for the final plunge, he had saved us all by his stop.

"He says they pried me loose and backed up to Jupiter with his train, letting one of the freight engines down to run my dead engine back to Saddler's. And so I finished that night in a berth in Number Seven while the wreck in the canyon was being cleared away.

"Doctor," said Muller as they sat a little later, "if the vagaries of dreams can conjure up anything more destroying to peace than the memory of that night's run, there must be horrors that I have not dreamed. The thing seems hideous and unreal to me now, just as it seemed part of the time when I rode it through. But, I am here, alive — witness of its reality."

"You will be better for the telling," Maxon asserted calmly, for he knew no more to say.

Presently, Sonny's sturdy little bare knees gleamed white and whiter in the deepening dusk upon the lawn, and soon he clambered to his mother's lap quite wearily.

"Willie has a loc'motive," he confided to her. "Can I have one? I want to be an eng'neer. My father 's an eng'neer on a great big engine."

This last was plainly intended to impress upon the doctor the full measure of that father's greatness.

"Danny, sonny dear," she said, as a tremor ran through Muller, "it costs too much."

"Willie's only cost a dollar," he said sleepily. "Have n't we any dollars?"

"Dollars and dollars, sonny dear," she whispered as she swayed him slowly in the cradle of her arms, "but only one little boy."

Pondering this, the child cuddled closer within her encircling arms, and murmuring drowsily, "I want to be an eng'neer," he slept, while they listened for a time to the crickets chirping endlessly:

"Peace, peace, peace, peace."

CHAPTER XIX

DAVY SHARER'S STAMPEDE

MULLER'S affair in Saddler Canyon took a good deal out of Bunnel, although the despatcher could in no way be held accountable for the trouble. The strain of those minutes in which Muller had run wild in the face of Dodson's precious Number Seven had taken its heavy toll of Bunnel, and, what was almost as heavy upon him at the time, it had brought back afresh to his mind the agony of the terrible blunder he had once made, when he alone was responsible.

Moreover, the years of intense application to his trying work were telling upon his endurance. Latterly, he had been feeling more frequently the fatal numbness in the finger-tips, after long application to the key in times of stress; the leaden heaviness of the wrists; and the set, cramped clutching of the hands at unexpected moments, when they should have been supple or relaxed.

He knew the sign manual of that ill for which there is no cure but prompt and permanent rest from the cause of it, and a lavish plenty of the good out-of-doors. Maxon had warned him with that single word: "Rest." And, when the injunction could no longer be disregarded, Bunnel bade Alta Vista a quiet farewell and took his way back to Denver, whose honored son, in railroad annals, he was.

Bunnel, withal, was bearded and placid and growing gray, and Enderby, like many another with whose hourly fate the hand and brain of Bunnel had dealt wisely and well through the years, gave him up reluctantly as though yielding up a brother, although they knew it was well. In their belief that, at the first, Bunnel's retirement must prove to him a great loneliness, and prompted as well by their longing for his company, one and another of them journeyed up from the Colorado division end, as occasion offered in their lay-overs at Crystal, and sought him in his quiet retreat.

It was one of these occasions that found Bunnel snug-rigged in smoking jacket and slippers, while Enderby, who had somewhat craftily incited him to reminiscence, sat in great contentment beside the open fireplace and listened.

"No," Bunnel admitted with a slow smile. "Clearly, I am not an expert judge of pictures. And Denver is not an art centre; though why it should not be is not so clear to me. That it is central to the most magnificent work of art that was ever left out of doors, few will deny."

There were several reasons, clear enough to Enderby, why Denver was not then, or likely soon to become, an art centre, and from train-despatching to the so-called finer art he knew was a far call. Yet, there had been method in his prompting, for he also knew that in the exquisite oil painting that hung upon the wall of Bunnel's comfortable quarters was the only visible link between the present calm of Bunnel's face and the bitterness of soul of that other night, long gone, when Bunnel had failed with deadly certainty.

That was a matter unique upon the two divisions, in that it had never come up for regular investigation. Sharer, the then division superintendent, had settled it with Bunnel behind closed doors, in effect, although Bunnel, at the time had asked bravely that the regular proceeding might prevail. The fact that it had not been an open investigation had weighed somewhat upon Bunnel's exacting sense of justice, even though that course must have operated heavily against him, as he well knew. Divining this, Enderby, with his keen insight and a normal measure of human curiosity, now sought to draw the bitter, inner record of it all from Bunnel and have him thus lay it away with the things that were done and definitely of the past.

Meanwhile, the picture lived and glowed in the firelit rays from the hearth-log and gathered shifting mysterious depths from the waning light of evening which was fast fading from the windows of the lofty retreat among the Denver hills. Enderby, fascinated by it, well understood how the picture in itself might solace many a lonely hour for Bunnel.

" You see," said Bunnel, rousing after a pause in which he had apparently conjured varied scenes from the leaping flames in the chimney, " You see, the boy was a clear misfit on an engine, but his father — best friend I ever had, unless I say the boy — would have it that the youngster must go on the road. The boy wanted to go to Paris."

" Yes? " said Enderby. " The boy? "

" Oh! " laughed Bunnel. " Davy. Dave Sharer's son. This was in the two years that you were running out of Chicago, and Sharer was superintendent of the mountain division. He was winning his spurs then to become the good general manager that he now is. The boy — well, he always was a likable youngster, but his work as a fireman was irregular, uncertain — oh, impossible.

" Sharer had set his heart upon some day turning the division over to him when it came time for himself to move up or retire. He had told me so, and he could n't quite give up the idea, for a time, although it was plain to most of us, from the start, that while the boy was always keenly alive to his surroundings, he was a dreamer of dreams. It was a bitter thing to Sharer, when, at last, he had to admit that, but, if I read the signs rightly, he is having a great consolation, now, in training up young Joe Harper for the goal he had set for his son Dave.

" Well, young Dave came on to fire, and between decorating the call-board in the roundhouse with none too complimentary crayon sketches of the peppery master mechanic we then had at Alta Vista, and doing far from first-rate firing on the busy yard engine, he made a no-account record before he ever got out on the main line. He never should have gone on the line at all, but old Dave, bless his hard-headed soul, would have it, so on young Dave went, firing across the mountains.

" That is where he broke into my destinies — so much the better for me, in the end, and pretty tough on the boy.

" In the end, I say, for the trouble he made on the road was constant and wearisome, but always just short of bad enough to take him off for good and all.

" He never quite laid out a train for want of steam, but wherever he was we had to watch closest, and that part of the train-sheet which recorded the movements of his engine was sure to show uneven work. Always dragging, getting in to clear by a scratch; always menacing the schedule but never quite laying down. And always cheerful about it; that was the rub.

" Nobody would turn in a report against him.

" Because he was his father's son? No, sir! It was because they liked him and could n't help it.

" They would come into the terminal and cuss him out scandalously, when they got there by a squeak, but if anybody suggested taking him off the complainants at once softened to a recital of his good qualities and were ready to fight for him.

" So it went, until one autumn day when the cattle rush was on, and then he broke his record. Up to that time, he had never been known to have enough steam to lift the safety-valve, running or standing, and by that fact he was greeted in every form of raillery. But, neither had he, thus far, totally hung up a train for want of steam.

" The line was full that day — worse luck — and so many crews being needed might account for Dave's being put upon a live-stock run. He was there, at any rate, and I had lost track of him for the time-being, but not for long, as usual.

" Over there in the desert, not very far from the middle of the division, there was a telegraph station, water tank, corral, and two sidings to serve them. You never saw them, I believe; made and abolished while you were away, east. I planned my train-sheet to have two stock extras meet there; load them with the herd of eight hundred cattle that we knew was coming up on a long drive out of Throgg's Creek bottoms, and run one train of them east, toward the Kansas fattening pens, and the other west and down into the Rio Grande bottoms, to feed during the winter. It was the usual thing for that time of year, you know, with fast freight, passenger, and heavy drags, galore, to work the stock trains among.

" Chartress, despatcher on the four o'clock to midnight trick, was off, and I was working his eight-hour shift, in addition to my own eight hours which I had worked earlier in the day.

" Tired? Of course. But I thought I was all right.

"I made the order that set things wrong; sent it and copied it in the book, in the absence of my operator. We were all over-worked, and he was out of the room when the need arose.

"It was as complete a lapse between hand and brain as ever went upon book or wire.

"In addition to the other trains, we had regular fast freights, No. 44 east and No. 43 west to put through without delay; two sections each. And heavy drag No. 45 working west over the division with two engines double-heading, cleaning up sidings, on third-class rights. There were reasons why I did not want to run the drag as an extra and I had been stabbing it to help the others out.

"In making the order, I thought '43' and sent and even wrote '45' and turned back to my train-sheet, without noticing the mistake.

"Sleepy? Not very. At least I did not feel so; just fagged and dull, until my copier came back into the room and found the error, fifteen minutes later. I became so wide awake then that I thought sleep would never come to me again.

"I had turned the double-header drag, No. 45, loose down the mountain, with rights equal to No. 43's fast freight rights, against the two sections of No. 44, and just before that had given the stock extra east the right to pass No. 44 when overtaken. The order was fit for No. 43, which I was then moving upon a similar order; but in the hands of No. 45's crew it was a death warrant. They went on it.

"Young Dave was firing the stock extra east and they were sure to overtake and pass No. 44.

"I 'll own that when I realized I had sent Dave Sharer's son to his doom, with the others, I stumbled into the little rear room and grovelled and writhed alone upon the floor, until the first keen agony was over.

"We had called every station that could hold them apart, by any chance, and all had said they were gone, both ways — to destroy one another in the darkness below the cliff where Montezuma's Head rises up sheer out of the canyon. We did all that men do with the wires at such times and it was all useless.

"I ordered the wreckers after them from both ends of the division and sent the caller out to find old Dave. When he came, I told him what I had done and asked him to kill me.

"He only pressed me down again into my chair and said: 'Steady, Bunnel.'

"Then he sat down at the key, without another word, and combed the line as we had done, but with a tremor in his sending that brought tears from the boys standing helplessly by.

"When it was plain to him that nothing we could do would save them, he turned and walked toward the door, looking like a man just stepped from the tomb. He went with the wreckers from our —

"Come in!" Bunnel called with sudden sprightliness, in response to a sharp tattoo upon his door. "Come in, Davy, boy!" he added as the door swung open before a smiling young fellow who waited for no further urging.

"Howdy, Uncle Bunnel! Room for one more? Train-running, I 'll venture," he said in a breath.

"Yes," chuckled Bunnel, "and I need you now, to finish my train-sheet.

"Enderby, this is Dave Sharer's first-born son. You knew him as a baby! Shake hands with him, grown a man.

"Davy, I have been saying how we tried to spoil a good artist to make a poor sort of fireman, before you went to Europe to study and paint, but I failed to say that you had just returned. Sit down and tell Enderby how you patched up my train-order, on your last run. How about the stampede, that last day?"

The young man lingeringly released his grip of Bunnel's hand and heartily acknowledged the informal introduction, before his eyes sought the picture, which seemed to embody subtle, living lights all its own. He moved toward it as though irresistibly drawn and stood long and silently gazing into its wonderful depths. At last, with a sigh of satisfaction and of longing, he spoke.

"Whatever may be the ordered span of my life, I would give one year of it to live that single day again."

"All of that day, Davy?" said Bunnel.

"Yes. All," the young man replied, settling himself in the shadowy background. "It was magnificent; even my marvellous blundering," and his happy laugh mingled with a chuckling growl of protest from Bunnel.

"Go on, then," said Bunnel. "Live what you can of it to-day."

"You know I never was worth discharging, until that day —"

"Yes. I have just told Enderby of that," interjected Bunnel soberly.

"Thanks," said Davy gleefully. "And then, as soon as I was worth it, I got it promptly.

"Poor frightened old Dad! When he stepped off of the wrecker engine at the first station this side of Montezuma's Head and caught sight of us after we had sorted out the tangle, he had learned already how we got there.

"He ran at me and hugged me and shouted: 'Dave, you young rascal! You are discharged! Fired! Do you hear? *Fired!*'

"The boys stood around and laughed happily and Dad wept some, and we had the queerest time the old mountain ever looked down upon. He would n't even let me finish the run, but held onto my coat sleeve all the way over the mountain, in the tackle-car.

"The way it came about, you know, we had laid there at the corral longer than we had expected to, before the herd came. The cattlemen were worn out and the herd was footsore and parched with thirst.

"That is what broke up Uncle Bunnel's slate in the first place — not I. I got in my work later; plenty of it, too. Instead of loading our twelve cars of cattle and pulling out a half-hour ahead of first No. 44, to meet first and second No. 43 at the first siding east, we were still waiting for the cattle when 43's and first 44 met and passed at the corral.

"So, we laid there and waited in the golden glamour of the desert until the enchantment of it began to steal in upon me, as usual, pretty much to the exclusion of all else. I loaded up the fire-box and made myself comfortable upon the seat. I was looking away toward the Throgg's Creek region when the first film of gray dust against the blue of the sky told of the coming of the herd.

"The little cloud of dust grew and rolled up above the far levels long before there was an atom of moving life visible in all the vast gray country around. No sound, except the purring of the engines, broke the silence of the seared plains and the quivering buttes. To me it was as though we were marooned in a sunny sea, with no more serious purpose than to revel in the matchless peace of it all."

"Dreaming," prompted Bunnel, with a nod of reprehension.

"Dreaming," assented Davy, with a smile of accord.

"At last, the sky-line was ruffled by a ragged fringe of tossing horns and, suddenly, the first of the wild things sprang up out of the last deep arroyo and came plunging across the plain toward us. Many of them had that day made their first acquaintance with men, much less with engines.

"Then the trial of skill, courage, and endurance of the herders really began. It opened with a sudden charge toward the corral and quickly broke to a whirling, milling, scattering flight at sight of the engines. A score of times the wild herd broke and scattered and as often it was rounded up, smoothed down upon its edges, crowded, flogged, dragged into a compact body. In the form of a great living V it was being forced forward to the wing-fences of the corral, behind which we lay waiting upon one of the sidings.

"Moaning, bellowing, retreating, advancing, at last the point of the big V was so near the corral that we could hear the clacking of tossing horns, like the ceaseless discharge of distant musketry, commanded by the ringing cries of the circling riders. We could even catch a glimpse of the rolling eyes of the frightened beasts.

"And the color-tones! The dull reds of their dusty hides; the duns, the grays, the violet tinges upon the white-faced Herefords, the —"

"Dreaming," said Bunnel deprecatingly, for, from the view-point of the despatcher, this was all rank railroad heresy; little short of desertion on the firing line.

"Dreaming," admitted Davy, without protest, "but it was a glorious dream, with a rude awakening.

"Almost, they were entering the wing-ways of the corral," he resumed, "when Colorado, the sun, the altitude, or all of these together worked one of their wonder-spells of the late autumn.

"The herd with lolling tongues, came bellowing, moaning, on out of the brilliant sunshine, to the southwest of us, when, in the north and east, there suddenly spread a great pall that rode swiftly down toward us on the crest of a driving wind. A wonderful veil of white, arched with the most brilliant of rainbows, rose higher and higher in the field of the sky's deepest blue and spread wider and wider upon the earth-line until it spanned the northern horizon, from earth to earth.

"The beautiful spectacle came sweeping on, with a dull roar that gradually rose above the moaning of the restless herd, and from highest arch to uttermost rims fell a wall of rain crystals that caught the emerald and gold and silver and pearl and drew them earthward in a transparent veil that shimmered from the dazzling pinks and red-gold and blues of the arch to the tawny gray of the seared desert.

"Back of it all rode the wind, swift and strong, in the rear of the ruffle of dust that puffed and smoked from the dry earth at the racing base of the wall of falling rain. And into the magic hollow of it all, like a great undimmed torch in the western sky, shone the brilliant sun, serene and undisturbed.

"The roar of the falling rain and the ripping wind grew rapidly louder and the last view I had of the herd before the end came was that of a restless sea of tossing horns in the sunshine, around which men were riding wildly.

"But I saw little of that. I was watching the wonderful storm which had not yet broken upon us.

"The bejewelled pageant rushed toward the tracks where all as yet was as placid as a dream —"

"Ah, your dreams, Davy!" nodded Bunnel, deploringly.

"The great arch was just about to sweep over us," Davy continued fervently, "and on toward the herd, when I called across the cab to Jim Dodson, the engineer, 'if I could paint it, Jim! If I could only —'

"And then my engine popped. For the first and last time in my career as a fireman, she popped!"

Bunnel groaned in anguish and flecked the ashes savagely from his cigar into the curling flames of the fire.

"It was no spurt; no muffled sputter; but a savage, rasping, roaring column of steam that had gathered, unobserved, from my last lazy-man's charge of coal. The long blast ended with a volley of stuttering 'Put-*put*-PUTS' that drove the last pangs of terror deep into the hearts of the frightened herd just when the storm struck the leaders, at the gates of the corral."

"Oh, lordy!" ejaculated Bunnel, whose mind was now strung again with the tension of that day's delays and agonies.

"Few living things could have stood up to it unafraid, and certainly not that wild herd," said Davy soberly and with real regret. "The point of the big V of cattle rose up off of the ground like the side edge of a suddenly upended wedge. It doubled back upon the herd, tossing it like chaff.

"The herd boiled up in the middle, milling and surging for a moment and then, in the wink of an eye, the great V turned itself inside out, as it were, and galloping, writhing in its ecstasy of terror, spread fan-shaped into the southwest, whipped to the furious pace of the storm.

"The men rode hard to head the stampede, but it was of little use; almost as hopeless as trying to head the storm. It was a glorious battle. Wherever they gathered a bunch of the flying herd together and, for an instant, turned it, it burst and shattered like a brown bubble upon the plain and reformed and joined the mass and fled again.

"At last, all had dropped from view except one lone yearling that raced with a horseman across the dim sky-line, in the storm. They went down together into the big arroyo and the plain was again as vacant and bare of life as though no living thing had ever moved upon it — a brown glistening expanse of mud, upon which the brilliant sunlight had suddenly broken again in full splendor.

"We were stunned by the swiftness of it. Jim Dodson spoke first.

"'You ought to go and die now, Davy,' he quietly said to me. 'You 're sure no good in this country.'

"I agreed with him. 'This looks like my chance, Jim,' I said.

"Two of the cowmen were plunging afoot through the mud, from the corral toward the engine, and they ran up over the pilot to the foot-board and slashed off the bell-cord as they came toward the front door of the cab, on his side.

"Jim took a look at them; reached down for the shaker-bar and met them at the door, snarling like a wolf.

"'You are in the wrong honkatonk!' said he. 'You fellows don't rope anybody off of an engine of mine!'

"Between us, we stood them off until they cooled down some and returned to the corral. I was so ashamed of stampeding the herd that I did not care much whether they got me or not. Jim seemed to have other ideas."

Bunnel, leaning forward, nodded understandingly and said:

"Well?"

"The herd was driven back, after a while," Davy proceeded, "and just when the last of it was being forced into our train, we got Uncle Bunnel's order to go; and pass first No. 44 when we overtook it."

The firelight played kindly pranks with the silver in Bunnel's hair as his head sunk lower upon his breast, at this, and he gazed silently into the glowing embers.

"We pulled out ahead of second No. 44, in mighty deep silence, as far as Jim and I were concerned. He took only one more whack at me. When Waverly, the conductor, handed up the order he tried to cheer things a bit by referring to the storm.

"'Much *agua!*' he said.

"'Much water!' echoed Jim. 'That's not what's been troubling us lately. For once in our busted and boggy career, we had too much steam!'

"We made good running of it, for a while, and at the first siding below the foot of the mountain we had run up close enough upon first 44 to drive them in and pass them there in the dark. It is mostly down-grade from the corral to that point; which accounts for our good progress," Dave explained, with an apologetic glance toward Bunnel.

"Beyond that, you know, the mountain climb begins, and I did not do so well. We were taking turns at working the injectors, as the rules required. I was so disturbed about the mess I had made of the cattle, that I forgot my injector for a little spell while it was on.

"The water-glass light was none too bright — I had forgotten to fill the lamp — and I got too much water in the boiler before Jim noticed it. The steam began to go back and then I got some holes in the fire, as usual. Oh, it was the same old thing! I was of no earthly use upon an engine; only, this time it was worse than ever before.

" When we made a run for the hill, toward Montezuma's Head, the steam played out badly and we stalled fairly in the middle of the first high bridge over the headwaters of Throgg's Creek.

" I never saw Jim so mad before, although I had often earned and received a deal of plain talk from him. He would n't talk to me at all. He was just getting well of a hurt knee, and he got down and limped over to a pile of old railroad ties near the end of the bridge and began to carry one of the driest of them toward the engine, to fire up with. I was following him with another tie on my shoulder when, suddenly, he tossed his tie to the ground, knocking me over backward with mine, and raised his hand aloft crying: 'Listen!'

" We heard it plainly enough. Around the sandstone hip of Montezuma's Head cliff, half a mile up the heavy grade and curve, you know, is the second high bridge, and down through the darkness came the deep drumming of a freight making all speed allowable across the bridge and down the mountain. It was the double-header, No. 45.

" Jim yanked me to my feet before I could rise, of myself, and dragged me with him out upon the bridge to the engine. He lighted the red lantern in the cab and thrust it down to me, just as the conductor and head brakeman came sulking up from our train.

" 'Run, Dave! For the sake of the boys, run and swing them down!' he shouted.

" The brakeman and I raced away together, while Jim set the whistle booming in the hope that the oncoming crews might hear.

" We did not get very far before the two engines of the heavy drag came thundering around the curve. They answered my flag-light, but went grinding on past us at a rate that seemed to leave no chance for any of them. The brakeman made a flying leap at a passing hand-iron; caught it and clung there like a squirrel, for an instant, and then clambered to the top. He ran over the cars, game to the core, twisting up brake-wheels on the non-airs to the last moment in which I could see him, before he faded into the night. That left me standing there by the track listening for the inevitable crash.

" It came, all too soon, but was not so terrifying as I had expected. I hurried back toward the engines and found a silent group of men near the end of the bridge. In the midst of them sat Jim with his lantern, upon his discarded railroad tie, and the rest of the boys were all there and all unhurt.

" ' Well done, boy,' he said as I came up. ' Only a matter of pilots knocked off. These fellows will couple on and drop us down the hill and we will try it over, when they get by and Bunnel finds out where we all belong on the train-sheet.'

" I skulked over and sat down where my tie had fallen — could n't stand up, in fact — and said nothing. Dodson seemed very proud of me, however. He got up and led the group to my humble seat and said: ' Davy, this is sure your last trip. You have had more steam, and less of it, than you ever had before. But,' turning to the crews of the double-header drag engines, ' it 's a mighty healthy thing for you fellows that he was n't fired yesterday, or we should have had a fireman who could fire, and been over the road with this stock two hours ago. Then, you would have met 44's here with a full head of steam on. D' ye hear them a-poppin' off down there in the canyon behind us? '

" 'Davy, you sure set up a soft mark for old Bunnel's double-header bull, and, I am thinking, he will be much obliged to you as long as he lives. But your old dad will fire you, sure enough.'

"He did — as I have told you," Davy added, "but he did more than that. He agreed to let me go to Paris, and when I had done this 'Stampede' there, and taken a medal on it, I sent the picture home to him.

"Good old Dad! He could n't bear to look at it, he said; hoped it would not hurt my feelings, he wrote, but he had given it to Uncle Bunnel, to put a little sunshine into the memory of that day — and I think sometimes, the Uncle rather likes it."

"He does, Davy, he does. Likes it immensely," said Bunnel. "More than anything else that he possesses."

"However," laughed Dave, "we have never been able to quite agree whether my incompetence most made or marred Uncle Bunnel's work that day."

Bunnel, gazing deep into the glowing embers, was smoking calmly, with the composure of a man who has attained peace through much anguish. He did not answer.

CHAPTER XX

DOC. MAXON: VOLUNTEER

SANCHO and Lota were probably as good specimens of southwestern Indian as the mountains and *mesas* of the Rio Grande have produced. Maxon first saw them one evening well on in summer. The general manager's car, on one of his occasional side trips of inspection to the coal camp, had just come to anchor at the upper end of Harmony Spur and the old yard engine that had brought it up was sputtering back between the high walls of the gorge, toward Villa Rica junction.

"On three legs!" said Maxon, gazing after the retreating engine, the irregular exhaust of which echoed lamely from the ragged walls of rock.

To the good doctor's eyes, after some busy years as physician and surgeon on the mountain single-track, all things were symptoms, for good or for ill, and nothing having even the semblance of being crippled long escaped his attention. That he might not become too intent upon these things, Sharer found a special pleasure in spiriting him away from Alta Vista, sometimes, upon the plea of a needed sanitary inspection of Harmony camp, or of some place else which usually proved to be equally restful and healthful.

This particular trip of the general manager had begun with something a little aside from the ordinary, and finally resulted in something quite unexpected in Maxon's steady-going routine. Leaving Chicago, it had launched Mack

Albry, erstwhile switchman, with a new light shining in his steady blue eyes, upon his first trip as Sharer's private secretary. There, also, young Tom Maxon, who laughingly asserted that he had " taught St. Luke's Hospital folks about all they could learn " from him, had been recovered from the sleeper which he had been about to enter, and brought back in unassuming triumph to the mountains, in Sharer's business car.

In that way it came about that, when the handsome pair of young Indians came down through the deep windings of the canyon, as silently as the lengthening shadows of the Big Ortiz, and unslung their heavy packs of pink wild plums for barter, Sharer and Maxon sat upon the observation end of the car speaking quietly of many things, while Tom, still thrilling with the return to the high places, leaned over the railing. In his eyes was that odd admixture of exultation and regret that can be found only in the eyes of a skilful surgeon looking, at leisure, upon his finished work. He was looking with admiration at Albry's stalwart figure, moving with its measured limp, upon the ground by the track, and it was from a rapt contemplation of Albry's cleverly substituted foot that Tom's glance arose, to settle upon the Indians, as they rounded the end of the car.

The blue-black hair of the woman, cropped square at the brows and hooded only in its own luxuriance, framed a rare oval of brown face, true Navajo. Her black eyes shone with something of the guarded look of an animal that would be friendly but fears abuse. Her navy blue kilt swung free to the knees and endlessly wound leggings of coarse white muslin continued to the neat moccasins in which she stood, graceful as a young cedar.

The man's idea of color had taken a wider turn. His narrow face, in lighter hue, rose with a certain dignity above his squared shoulders. A loose blouse shirt of some brilliant red stuff hung free over canvas trousers that had been white, and in his thick white brow-band a single narrow feather of changing gold and green wound twice around his head and hid its ends in the folded linen. His black hair streamed loose to the shoulder in the breeze that rustled up the canyon, and against the background of lights that riot upon the peaks of the Ortiz at sunset, the red-gold and pearl and pink that turn the sky to living opal, the Indians stood and belonged. They were part of it, and very good to see among the crowding cliffs.

With their brief bartering done they presently bent to lift their packs, and from Lota's wrist dropped into view a broad thong of tanned rattlesnake skin upon which hung a heavy oval of turquoise, gray in spots with pieces of matrix. The immediate prospect of a two-bit silver piece, which Albry promptly produced for purposes of delay, gave the others time to gather about and examine the stone while she shifted uneasily from side to side, with her eyes upon Sancho. His hand went slowly under the wavering field of red to his belt, and his glistening eyes never left the men. Evidently they were not the first who had seen and wanted the turquoise. Its matchless blue was shaded in places to softest green from contact with the flesh, a beautiful fault, and across the face ran a narrow thread, deep-veined, and yellow with pure gold. It was Tom's exclamation that brought the doctor closer, laughing. He was well used to the tawdry trinkets of the frontier and, therefore, disposed to hold aloof.

"Doctor, it 's a gem!" said Tom, in ill-suppressed excitement.

"You are a gem of a young surgeon, Tom," laughed he.

"And I'm hoping you will shine in this railroad setting of mine, after a while. But, barring you and me, gems are rare in this range of hills."

He ended with a low croon of delight as he turned the glinting strip of gold to the slanting rays of the setting sun and saw, further, that the flakes of gray matrix rock were also shimmering with points of free gold.

"You sell it?" he quietly asked of the Indians.

"No sell it," said Sancho softly.

"Are you Navajo?" Maxon asked of the man.

"*Quien sabe?*" he replied. "Who knows?"

A few moments later, they were looking at the receding figures of the Indians as they packed down the steep slope toward the recently installed coal-breaker that hung upon the mountain-side, a short distance below.

"Never saw the like of that," said Maxon. "If they would talk they could tell a tale that would start the Argonauts this way again with a rush. They know better, you may notice. I have been in these mountains twenty years, all told, and that is the first gold-veined turquoise that has come out of hiding; accident at that.

"When I came out here a young man, I lived for five years like a wild man among the Navajos. Among them, but not of them, you understand. Lungs. Always there has been the camp-fire tale of a place of devils, where the mountain had eyes like sun and sky, but men who went that way came back no more. The woman is Navajo, but the quetzal feather in the man's brow-band tells an older story."

"Look, doctor!" Albry suddenly interrupted, as his hands clenched and he started limping angrily toward the breaker.

But, while he was yet straining forward with creditable speed, Maxon's early training had sent him bounding far ahead like a veteran stag over the bowlders.

The Indian had gone into the door of the shaft-house, and as he came out he was struck on the back, turning him half around. His pack fell crushed and oozing to the ground. In a staggering half-turn he drew and sunk a long knife into the framed darkness, then went down with a branching gash from a lump of coal that shot out of the doorway and struck between his eyes. He lay there stunned, clutching the handle of the broken knife, while blood welled over his upturned face and slowly crimsoned his head-band of white and golden green. Over him stood the woman, grasping the knife-blade, which, with a panther's spring, she had wrenched from the door-frame.

They took him to the car and dressed the ragged wound while Lota stood motionless upon the car platform. When at last she ceased her searching stare at the shaft-house and came into the car it was seen that blood had dripped and pooled, unheeded, from her hand.

"There, Sancho!" said Maxon as they finished. "Good head. Get well soon now. You eat?"

The man nodded, and the doctor, turning to the general manager, who had been a silent onlooker, said somewhat tartly: "Just among old friends, Sharer, there 's my thirty-thirty Winchester behind the door if you want to inject something peaceable into that breaker outfit." And the general manager grunted in a way that meant things for the breaker.

"No Winchester," said the Indian. "I kill 'em knife next time," he said, as he turned his battered face from Maxon to Sharer.

"No kill," growled Sharer. "You don't kill here," he said, taking a quick stride toward them.

The woman crouched a shade lower where she stood, near Maxon. His hand had gone into his coat pocket and come out with a start, empty.

"Careful, Sharer, careful," said he in a low voice. "You will have the squaw upon you like a fury. She don't understand all of it. Best not to corner them too close when there is blood running loose. Feed them."

They ate hungrily, Lota using her left hand only, and both smoked contentedly for a time upon the floor. Then the genial effect of food had its way and the woman suddenly extended her right hand, palm upward, toward the older doctor. It showed an ugly gash from side to side, and in it lay the long double-edged blade she had been clutching. It brought Maxon quickly to his feet and from George, the cook factotum, a shrill laugh that failed as he crumpled to the floor in a faint and flattened out upon the platter he was bearing away. The crash of the dish roused him like a call to battle. He gathered the fragments hurriedly and poised for flight, the Indians looking at him as though his was a regular evening performance.

Sharer, big and calm, had been regarding him in some surprise and in the eloquent silence of which Sharer was master. "George," said he, as the cook gained the swinging door, "are you going to be a railroad man or just a good cook?"

"Ah hope Ah am, suh, Mistah Sharer. Ah hope Ah am."

"Shaken, but diplomatic, eh?" said Sharer. But it went quite over George's head.

"Well, not sca'cely, suh. No, suh, Mistah Sharer. Ah did n't know Ah did. Leastways not to mean it. Ah did n't do nothin', an' when the lady pulled huh — huh sword, Ah was thinkin' about a pahty Ah attended last week, suh, an' it disco'ven'enced me foh a few moments. Yes, suh, it did."

Sharer flushed in an effort at restraint, then snorted suddenly until the ashes from his cigar scattered wide upon the carpet, and recovering hastily, said: "All right, then, George. But remember what I told you when you came with the car. We are going to make a man of you here, or kill you."

"Yes, suh," bowed George, as he backed through the door. "Ah hope you will, suh, Mistah Sharer. Ah hope you will."

A moment later the half-taunting laugh of Mack Albry came, subdued, through the passage from the forward end and George's voice rose in earnest defiance: "Ah thought it was a razor, Ah tell you. An' yo'-all done know mah razor was out heah on yo' desk wha Ah was a-shavin' yo' when de bell went foh dat lunch. 'Fraid! Who, me?"

The plaguing laugh of Albry ran up and down the scale until Sharer, smiling somewhat against his will, pressed a button that brought Mack, note-book in hand, flushed but respectful.

"Just make a note, Albry," said Sharer. "Please make a note that I called you. And you might add a memorandum that George needs absolute quiet until he has finished getting supper. That 's all," he added quizzically.

When the first stars were peering down over the canyon's ragged sky-line and the shadows were black among the cliffs the Indians threaded their way up among the bowlders and vanished at a turn of the rock, upon paths that zigzag away into the purple mountains. As Sharer's modest party sat down to the bright little supper-table the mournful wail of a coyote came quavering down from the rim-rock far above them: keynote of life to the lonely creatures who had just passed back into their wilderness. With that shivering note of almost unearthly longing and despair, came to each one of them in the car a clearer sense of having seen a side-light on the tragedy of a passing race. For a time, the simple meal was served in silence.

Maxon turned, presently, to Sharer, with softened face and said: "There is a saying, hereabout, that a Navajo has no more gratitude than a coyote — prowl and go. But, since I have known much of them, I have always held otherwise. They care no more for gold, as gold, than the coyote does, but they have us sized up to a turn. Most of us will take gold at any cost. They want something to eat, and peace, and they are not telling what these hills hold. They know it would mean another push away from the water and into the desert for them. Look at that."

He laid the lump of glinting turquoise, with its snakeskin thong, in the circle of light upon the table and smiled.

"It was in my coat pocket when the squaw fronted up for war. She wanted no thanks. That is n't their way. They have given what is evidently a very old amulet, and they know something of its value. Unless I am mistaken, many a hungry Navajo, Aztec, too, perhaps, has fumbled that bit of rock, and believed it would save him from the Hunger Spirit when the wind howled across this canyon in winters long gone. Gratitude, I call it, and clean strain at that."

"Bad judgment, I call it," said Sharer, as he finished a careful inspection of the stone. "Bad judgment, Maxon," he chuckled. "Those two operations of yours were finished in thirty minutes, and they cost the Navajos a thousand dollars, if I 'm a judge of this raw material."

When the railroad first crossed the mountains and went down through El Soledad Canyon, its coming was as hateful to some natives of the Rio Grande Valley as the aggressive descent of a blue wasp upon a spider's web. The centuries-old wrongs of ancient Queres, of far Zuni and Acoma, were almost as vivid to them as though of yesterday, by reason of legend, all too true. They hoped for nothing better, then, at the hands of white men. Nor were they far amiss. Only the method had changed. To them, the result would be the same as that of long ago.

Some of them stayed near the river, to resist and lose, but many scattered into the web-work of the Sandias, the San Ysidro and the Ortiz Mountains, to brood and readjust themselves to the new conditions. Thus strange partnerships were formed that linked the then disordered present with the mysterious past. Sancho and his wife, Lota, were of the second generation in the Ortiz.

The old Spanish missions had set their farther outposts high up in the Glorietas, three hundred years ago, where nothing now remains but crumbling adobe walls to mark the passing of their ambition. The coming of a railroad construction camp into the brooding silence of those secluded places awoke it like the toppling of a crag into the canyon. Abuses followed and left their mark upon the natives, deep as the sear of a brand: a blend of hope, fear, hatred, and resignation that can be read nowhere else as in the face of a Navajo or a Mexican Indian. Both are instinctively kindly peoples; makers of pottery of classic beauty, venders of fruit, loafers, farmers in a small way, and withal a long-suffering, patient folk.

When the Harmony Spur was pushed into the new coal-fields toward the Ortiz the quiet of their life was again disturbed, and again they suffered variously. None saw these things with deeper insight than the calm-eyed doctor, and, therefore, his anger had arisen as quickly as his sympathy when he saw the Indian fall.

When the winter came down that year it swept the San Ysidro country with a vengeful blast and broke its crest in fury upon the Ortiz. One wild night in January Sharer was again at Harmony with the car. Being of the rare few who can conduct big human operations without losing touch of the finer humanities, he was there, for the most part, because he was anxious about Maxon, who had taken his wife and children to St. Louis since the summer, gone through his dark agony alone, and left his motherless children there to outgrow their sorrow in the old home that first had sheltered him. Enderby and McPeltrie being most available for the short extra trip out of Villa Rica that evening, had brought the car up with their engine. McPeltrie, chatting with the conductor, stood guard in the engine cab, while Enderby, accepting Sharer's customary invitation, had joined those who sat in the car.

Maxon had brightened in the genial gruffness of Sharer, and, with Enderby, was sketching events of other winters in the mountains; of sunny open years when the air was like an elixir, and again, of bleak months when cattle lay starved in the snow for miles along the railroad. They drew modestly from the deep well of experience, as strong men are apt to do, and presently the talk turned to the almost impossible existence of the desert Indians. From that it was but a thought to the incident of the summer.

"I have observed those Indians closely since that affair at the breaker," said Maxon, "and their souls are as white as stars. When Ruth, my wife, fell sick before we — went East," he continued, with a catch in his deep voice, "I brought her from Alta Vista down to Villa Rica, you know, hoping something from the slightly lesser altitude. There was nothing eatable in this country that can be had by an Indian for the gathering and packing twenty miles on foot that we did not find upon our door-step every sun-up while we stayed there. And one morning last October, when she seemed to be fading out with the leaves in spite of all I could do, I suppose the Indians saw it. At any rate, they appeared from somewhere on the mountain above the house, and came, unobserved as they thought, into the door-yard. There, I saw them plant a little cross of green cedar boughs under her window, and upon it, tied with snakeskin, was a rough duplicate of the turquoise and gold amulet that you saw last summer, but fresh from the rock. Queer freak of old mission work and savage fetich probably, but they were doing what they could to help me ward off the evil day, and if the time ever comes I will make good my debt to them when they need it."

"Maxon," said Sharer, "they must have the ledge that holds that stuff."

"They may have," replied Maxon. "I did n't ask. I have seen nothing of them since I returned from St. Louis. The snow shut down soon afterward, and I fear it goes hard with them."

In the pause that followed the moaning of the wind in the canyon keyed to a shriller note, and a fierce blast struck down upon the car from the heights. Dry snow scurried and hissed against the windows and the car timbers crackled in the wrenching blast. Sharer was inwardly congratulating himself that the short twilight had been used to complete the out-of-doors inspection before the night and the storm came down upon them. With drawn shades, they sat around the table, newly cleared of its supper wares, and settled deeper into the genial haze of smoke and warmth that comforts a smoker on a winter night. They were soothed by the purring of the road engine which McPeltrie's return to it had set up, while it stood with the car awaiting the permissive order to return to Villa Rica. And then came Maxon's opportunity.

As a fiercer blast swept down upon them, the end door of the car swung open a little space, then closed with a loose snap of the latch. Sharer rang a call that brought the cook from his after-supper nap promptly begun.

" George," said he, " set the latch on that end door, and when we get back to Chicago have it examined."

George set the door ajar, glanced at the latch, and peered into the blackness outside, then closed the door quickly and held the knob, his sleepy eyes suddenly gleaming round and white in the gas-light.

" Yes, suh, Mistah Sharer," he announced in a choking whisper. " They 's a lady there, suh."

" A lady? " burst out Sharer. " Not this far from State Street in a blizzard, George. Are you quite awake? Does the lady seem to have a razor? "

" No, suh, Mistah Sharer, the lady don't seem to have none watevah. It 's the lady wha' had the knife las' summah, suh."

" Open," said Sharer.

Lota came in wrapped in a blanket that shed snow and water like an oilskin. She covered her face with the old woollen treasure and crouched in a pitiful heap of chrome red and yellow and black in the corner just within the door.

" Food, tea, George," said Sharer briefly.

"How now, Lota?" said Maxon, and getting no answer to that, or his further queries, said, as George returned: "Come, eat. Eat," he urged, as she made no sound.

Hunger soon came uppermost and the famished woman ate greedily and drank of the comforting tea.

"Where is Sancho?" Maxon continued.

Then her control gave way and bursting into a low, wild, guttural of Spanish and Navajo, she poured out her tale of trouble. To Maxon it was all plain as though of his own tongue, and his face went white. In a moment she sprang up, saying:

"He no eat. No sleep. Much sick. You come?"

"Yes. I come," replied Maxon.

Turning toward Sharer, he said: "It 's black smallpox, Sharer. She had it lightly, years ago, she says. I am immune. I 've got to go now or he will be over the cliff before morning. When you get down to Villa Rica to-night, fumigate the car at once. You will go clear of the pest."

"Maxon, you are wild, to start on such a trip to-night! Wait here until daylight, if they must have you. I 'll lay up with the car, if you will wait," Sharer protested fiercely.

But the doctor had not ceased his swift preparations, and shortly he bade them good-bye and trudged off through the waning storm with his Winchester slung across his back, the woman packing ahead with medicines and food. Rough going, he called it, but added, with a characteristic grasp for the brighter side, that there would be a spring thaw before he came down again, if the case went right.

"No, Tom," he declared firmly, against the young surgeon's appeal to be taken. "This is your first opportunity to patch up the division until I return.

"Just put him to it, Sharer, will you?" he called back at starting, and Sharer, for once, swore under his breath, without at all meaning to impeach the fitness of young Tom.

So, they dropped hurriedly down to Villa Rica that night, the black canyon closing in behind their tail lights with a hoarse roar like that of a storm at sea.

CHAPTER XXI

ENDERBY'S CHOICE

IT may be that the rumored retirement of Doc. Maxon, noised abroad soon after that of Bunnel and of Muller, had set Enderby to a closer reckoning with the years. But, be that as it may, once he had reached a conclusion, he set about its enactment promptly, as was his habit.

"Dinwiddy," said he in one of their closer exchanges, "I sometimes misdoubt me whether a man of my years ought to sit up at the front, much longer, on these fast passenger runs. They are getting heavier all the time, with plenty of people always perked up, hopeful and believing, back of the engine.

"There 's never much that I doubt it, you mind, or I 'd have said so sooner. But, some, Dinwiddy, *some!* And that 's time to come away. Ain't it, boy?"

A strange blend of pain and satisfaction came upon the seasoned "boy's" face as he listened, but he looked squarely into Enderby's eyes and answered manfully:

"Yes. It is time, Mark. It is not that you don't get there, but — it is time, Pap.

"What do you want, instead? Your rights are good for anything that you can handle."

"I 've talked it over, a good bit, with my wife," replied Enderby, "and we reached a sort of compromise. She was all for having me drop out, complete and joyful, but I can't go that, just yet, Dinwiddy.

"Nope, I can't. It 's a long ways to nowhere, and I want to let go sort of easy and graceful; make a mild spatter and a few ripples in the railroad pool before my name is wiped off of the call-board," he finished, with a smile that almost hid a hint of moisture that had sprung unbidden to his eyes. "I want one of the daylight freight runs to Crystal, if you are as sure as I am that I 'm good for it."

"You are good for it," said Dinwiddy.

That was about all of the incident that definitely passed Enderby, for a time, of his own choice, to the slower-going, but still important freight runs, and, meanwhile, those who were directing the development of Joe Harper were shaping his course back to the mountains.

"Harper," said the general manager when he had called him in for that purpose, "without going into the reasons why, I should like to have you take what may seem a step backward. I should like it if you would go to Alta Vista and report to Dinwiddy for whatever duty he may assign to you.

"If you decide to do so, I can assure you only that your further work will be observed with a good deal of interest, and that you will be advanced as rapidly as seems best for the service."

That was all. He watched Harper's face closely for the few moments taken for decision and apparently read there something that was far from displeasing.

"I will go, Mr. Sharer," said Harper quietly, and when he left the room Sharer's hand released his from a clinging grip which had in it something of the strength of a buried ambition which once had centred upon his own son, Dave.

When Harper came back to Alta Vista as a regulation beginner among Dinwiddy's forces he was so green that he was proud of it, or at least he said so in a cheerful and convincing way, and nobody questioned his right to take his own measure.

The stalwart little division point, faithfully guarding the New Mexico end of Big Pass, through which the railroad climbs loftily up many steep and crooked miles on the Colorado side, and, similarly, drops cautiously down the southern side into the shelter of the town, received him with its usual cautious friendliness. Beyond that, nothing, except that even Dodson found in him no glaring outward defect. The earlier promise of the oculist had been fulfilled, and Harper, freed of his offending glasses, was no longer a "four-eyed cuss."

The grim wholesomeness that is born there of plenty of sun in an atmosphere more than a mile above sea-level; and the half-circle of rim-rock that aspires further skyward back of the town, giving accent to the open reaches that spread away invitingly to the southward and meet the far tablelands as the sea meets the sky, altogether form a prospect that clears the mental vision. . Young hearts, properly attuned, there catch the keynote of their surroundings promptly; and so it proved with Harper.

When Dinwiddy set him regularly to firing a freight engine over the mountain for Mark Enderby everybody looked satisfied; which meant a great deal at Alta Vista. Together, they fitted into an engine cab like the parts of a good design. Moreover, Mark, like old Bill Amsler, who stumped about defiantly on his oak leg and presided over the varied and sometimes vivid destinies of the livery stable, just off the plaza, was considered an authority on local history. This had its advantages for a starter in the ranks, such as Harper, and also, it was to Harper's advantage that, aside from their fund of local lore in common, Enderby and Amsler were quite different.

The town was quiet when Harper arrived. There had not been a wreck or a fire in the year past and no other prime cause for excitement, yet, they who knew Alta Vista's quiet moods knew that the guns were all oiled and the hose-cart well housed. All manner of men appeared, now and again, in Alta Vista's shifting human sands, and Enderby, so far as plainly written surface indications would allow, welcomed all alike. If, then, they appeared to him worth while, he tried, further, to help them. Otherwise, he left them to their own devices. Joe came late in the break-up of winter. But not until well along in the spring did Enderby's ideas of practically assimilating him into Alta Vista's public affairs take definite form; and then it was Joe who gave the occasion.

One morning in May, they left Crystal, on the Colorado side, starting while it was yet dark, on their all-day freight run over the mountains to Alta Vista. Joe stood in the gangway, facing east, an hour later, as the engine throbbed out its measured strength, laboring toward the top of a great earth-billow in the foothills. The sun gave imminent signs of climbing up back of the big mountain range, and darkness fled swiftly.

The Spanish Peaks, in the friendly air of coming summer, looked twin spires of gold, frosted with the crystal of their late-lingering ice and snow. Pike's Peak, more remote, a mere shadow against the growing sky-line, took on slowly the exquisite blend of violet and steel that makes the burnt amethyst almost a precious stone. Below, and all about the track, awoke the nameless beauty of the vast silent reaches of the foothills and the plains in early morning, as when the coming sun sends over the mountain barriers an advance-guard of light to reconnoitre for the occupation of a brilliant day in the high altitudes of the south.

The shadows receded deeper among the draws and *coulees.* The star-flecked dome of the sky whitened under the insistent light of the sun. It flushed pink, then fiery red at the sky-line, and with a flash fit to herald the launching of a new-born sun in a new orbit, the first clear rays shone gloriously over the rocky battlements, gilding the plains and making a heroic creature of the laboring engine, and fell softly upon the grimy face of Harper, with an all-embracing touch that made them, all alike, almost divine, beneath the deepening blue of the wide sky.

Harper silently revelled, anew, in the glory of it, until his soul could bear no more.

"Ye gods!" he suddenly cried, with a wide sweep of his cap against the gently stirring air. "You great and everlasting Phœnix!

"Mark, are you seeing it? Why don't more people live out here where they can breathe air and live life? I 'd like to do something for this country, in return for what it is doing for me."

"She 's fine. The finest! And I 'm always seeing it," said Enderby, with a pleased sidelong glance at Joe's upturned face. "Look out for your fire now. I 'm going to make a run through this sag, for the top."

When they were well over the swell and drifting steadily down the other side, Enderby resumed without prelude:

"We 've got one of them over at Alta Vista." But, Joe's face remaining blank, he added, "Phœnixes; leastways, that 's what we called it."

"Phœnixes?" echoed Joe.

"Yes. That 's what young Tom Maxon named it. It come up the time we organized the Alta Vista fire-department, a few years back. He was n't much more than a big, happy cub, at that time, and he put life and spirit enough into the proceedings, at the start, to nigh about wreck the town.

"Tom was my fireman then. Doc. Maxon brought him out here from the East, and raised him like one of his own. Doc. allowed he wanted to toughen him up some before he commenced reading medicine."

"Have you a fire-department? Who is chief?" queried Joe.

"We 've got about one hundred and twenty pounds pressure of clear water over there," said Mark, "from up back of the Geyser Peak. And we 've got a hose-carriage and a Phœnix," he continued, with twinkling eyes, "but I ain't chief now. We 're kind of disorganized. While the balance hung about even between Alta Vista and Villa Rica, some of us moved away and the like.

"Mebbe tell you about it when we get over there this evening, if they don't hold us too long on the mountain," he added a moment later, and turned to look from the cab window out over the soft green plains, where wonderful carpets of tender grass, and square miles of pink wild phlox and brilliant dwarf sunflowers stretched away to the distant horizon and rippled and swayed in the breeze; a glad and smiling prospect, until the desert should grow bolder in the summer's heat, and crowd in around the feet of the mountains, in the withering, age-long struggle to wear them down.

All in good time, they rolled down off of the last line of foothills, into the deep defile at Sentinel, the coaling-station, and soon they were ready, with helpers added, for the long pull over the Pass. Shackston, conductor, with a bunch of wild phlox tucked into his hat-band, came striding forward confidently to the engines. He handed up through orders, with rights to Alta Vista, without a meeting-point.

"Take them away," said he, and went to the rear.

The red board dropped, the two big consolidations sent the echoes bounding and rebounding between the cliffs, in the start for the mountain, and Joe, drawing on his heavy gloves, called impersonally to the chattering waters of the nearby Geyser Water and to the flying echoes: "Laugh! You don't feel any better than we do. Do they, Mark?" he added, as he turned to his fire.

"Reckon not," said Enderby, and opened out a little stronger.

The Pass, always majestic, seemed in a friendly mood in the bright afternoon. Winding noisily in and out among the tender shimmering greenery of advanced spring, the engines voiced a mighty song of greeting to the heights. As the hours passed, the heavy climb became a triumphal march among a nodding, whispering host, where each turn upon the shoulders of the mountain discovered a deeper beauty, and the sombre shadows in the depths seemed brooding in happy peace.

Joe stood often in the gangway mopping his heated face; caught great breaths of the rare clear air, and looked upon it all with delight, scarce lessened by his heavy labor.

Enderby, well seasoned and practical, but not less keenly alive to the unfolding beauty, settled back loosely upon his cushion. Missing none of the multitude of sounds that told of the working of the engine, and losing none of the mute messages of the familiar landscape, he went back over memory's long trail to earlier days in the mountains. At last, the regular clink of the shovel and the fire-door, the purring of the injector, and the slow beat of the engines blended in an heroic lullaby that soothed and gently buffeted his tired senses. The engine coupled on ahead gave a peculiar sense of security and half-retirement. A pleasant thrill of relaxation pervaded his body. He thought with increasing effort. And then, just among ourselves — this, Mark nodded and slept peacefully, at disconnected periods of a few seconds each, in the midst of the tumult. He even dreamed a bit in a jumbled sort of way, about the last run of the old Alta Vista fire brigade, until the leading engine came in sight of the target near the top of the mountain. When the head engine whistled for the board, he was at once wide awake, with an apologetic smile toward Joe.

" We were coming along with the rest of them all right, Mark," laughed Joe.

" I was n't missing anything. I heard her all the way," said Enderby; and men who know of these things would guardedly agree to that, even though they first tried to look virtuously astonished.

When the threatening descents of the rugged pass had, under Enderby's skilful hand and keen eyes in which there was then no hint of sleep, surrendered them into the safer levels of the yard in the wide valley at Alta Vista, and their work was done, Mark led the way to a shed-like building at one side of the plaza. Turning a key in the rusty lock he threw open the door. The interior showed a two-wheeled hose-cart of odd but strong build, faded, but still rivalling the rainbow in colors. The room was bare of furniture and from the middle of the ridge-pole hung a stout rope that led to a bell-hammer in the small cupola above. The bell looked remarkably like an old locomotive bell.

Mark seated himself upon the tongue of the hose-cart and said, " Sit down, Joe. This is the fire outfit we were talking about this morning. We ought to be reorganized, and I believe you 're the man to help do it. There 's been a sight of quiet talk about it since we all moved back from Villa Rica, and nothing done. The town 's a coming town and we 've got to fraternize and grow.

" I told you, partly, how we come to call this carriage ' Phœnix,' and how Tom Maxon stood on that, but, for myself, I never had none too much use for the name.

" Always seemed to me like a bird that has no more sense than to set itself afire and then has luck to be raised up from her own ashes, ain't, in my judgment, a noways reliable nor dependable bird, if it goes and repeats such bold experiments, indefinite.

" But young Tom had a book about it, and some other freaks of nature, and when we joked him pretty hard about it, he just laughed and said it was all right to have it, because that 's the habits of Phœnixes. And just to finish him, we said mebbe we 'd better get a Phœnix for the hose-cart. We let it go at that till the next meeting night.

" Tom just laughed some more, and the first we know, he went up on the rim-rock with a rifle and shot the old hen eagle that had been nesting and yelling and hatching and fighting and — oh, just say general housekeeping up there, about like folks, ever since the railroad come through.

" The mule-team freighters in the wagon trains that lined out Cimarron way with provisions and stuff, said the birds had been catching prairie dogs for a hundred miles around Alta Vista and the Cimarron country, as far back as they could remember. They took it personal, same 's if they 'd been shot at and missed, or nigh about so.

" You see, Joe, it 's a mighty short span of years back to the actual frontier days of this town that we 're all proud of, and there 's me and many another here that 's seen near about the whole making of it. And, at that, there 's plenty of distance yet to go, before she 's a metropolis.

" Well, it was a freighter that nailed Tom coming down off the cliff with the old hen eagle, dead. Pleased as a young retriever with his first sage-hen, Tom was. The freighter set up his long yell amongst some more of them old silver-tips that were stocking up on canned and bottle goods, over along Main Street. And that 's about the closest Tom 'll ever come to being hung, till he 's indicted regular and can't prove an alibi.

" You might not think it, but I 'm an awful good shot, if I do say it myself, and most of all with a Winchester," interjected Enderby, with no appearance of boasting.

" Of course, if they 'd shoot at me first and get me, like from behind the coal chutes, over yonder, why they 'd get me. But, Harper, if they 'd shoot at me and miss me," he continued with half-closed eyelids and a confident smile, " I 'd sure get them before they could shoot again. There was mighty good shooting, that day,— plenty of it,— to get him away from them after they 'd got a lariat onto his neck. But we convinced them without anybody being hurt beyond patching.

" We were all worked up for a fire company, about then, and that made it look better for Tom than if he had just shot the eagle for fun. But I would n't advise anybody to try to get a fresh one off of the cliff, even now. The old rooster eagle got himself another mate and they 're living up there now. Folks here feel that they need them in the landscape."

Joe arose from his perch beside Enderby and turned to look up to where a pair of golden eagles were circling and screaming in the waning sunlight that still bathed the top of the sombre cliff and tipped the dwarf cedars with purple and gold. His broad young shoulders heaved convulsively once or twice, but not quite sure whether he was being joked or seriously measured, his face was composed and his mellow voice steady and respectful when he turned again to Mark and said:

" I believe we don't need a fresh bird. I think the old one might do, if you have it."

" Suits me. We have it," said Mark, and made no further comment until, with a look of reverie in his keen eyes, he remarked: " It was a fire that lost Amsler his leg, I might say, if we were talking about Bill's leg. But, let 's get on about this Phœnix business."

" Did n't Bill lose his leg on the road? " said Joe with studied care.

" No," said Enderby with prompt and somewhat unaccountable emphasis. " Bill never took to the road except about once or twice a month when he turned out with a gun to collect his bills from the erring railroad wayfarers. I know how he lost that leg, though, and while I deplore his loss, he sure got what was coming to him, and not much more. I reckon since you 're to live here, I may as well tell you about that, because, as Doc. Maxon would put it, it will give you some valuable points of view, touching things past and present.

" This fire outfit dates back to the time when Alta Vista got drunk once a month regular, before the pay-car could pull out of town; and the pay-car always hurried. I used to pull the paymaster then. Bill Amsler was always counted due to have the magazine of his rifle as full as the rest of him, in about half an hour after the car got in. And in ten minutes more he was due to march down the straight track in the back-shop and stampede all them machinists over there while he searched out the people he was looking for — horse-hire accounts, or most anything in the way of a grudge, that he was holding back. But he always made the roundhouse gang run for cover first, on general principles, and none of them ever stopped to ask him for his card, or did he belong to the union. They just lit out and done it quick.

" Why did they allow it? Joe, a railroad in a new country has to allow lots of things, just at first, that it don't have to allow later on. But, I 'm coming to Bill's allowance.

" Take a look, some time, over there in the shop office where Chubb, then shop foreman, was a little slow about getting his head out of range during one of Bill's festivals. Bill put a .45 acorn bullet through the edge of the door-casing and crimped the poke of Chubb's cap, scandalous, before Chubb could drop under the table and crawl out the back door behind the shop boilers. Bill was mean all through when he was drunk, although I don't deny there were some live reasons working in the shops now and again. But, he was special mean the night he got the leg, among that Paradise gang that had rode over.

" You know about Paradise? No? Well it 's about ten miles, t 'other way from our run, down the division here and some back from the track. They always wanted to control the water from Geyser Peak. They were fighting us pretty hard for it then, but they did n't make it, and now they never will. Alta Vista is the big bee, from now on."

Enderby's eyes kindled in reflective silence, but he soon resumed:

" I 'm for peace and kind relations with folks, and the Paradisers were bad enemies, but, if you 'll look this carriage over, in particular the back end and the wheels, you can see there was some reason to it."

Harper walked to the rear of the cart and read aloud from the dim gilt lettering: "Phœnix of Alta Vista. T' ell with Paradise!"

"That 's it," nodded Enderby. "I never did favor giving out that insulting sentiment, in public, no matter what a man might be thinking. But once it 's out, you 've got to support it, and stand by your town. It was calculated to start things. Things that there was no other way of stopping," he finished, after a thoughtful pause.

"It looked mighty sassy when we had that Phœnix spread-winged on the front. Go look into that cupboard in the corner. Tom Maxon and the painter in the back-shop figured out that adornment. But, you must not forget that, in a new community like we were, the first need is to kindle public spirit. This helped."

The opened cupboard showed a golden eagle, of noble size, beautifully mounted, with wide-spread wings and opened beak. But it had been treated to a coat of gold-leaf over a coat of shellac, and the rich plumage was ruffled and tufted by the tracks of several bullets.

"For myself, I never took much notice of Bill Amsler's doings," Enderby continued, "until my wife, and our neighbor, Mrs. Sones, went down to Main Street to see the Phœnix go by, when the hide-house burned, over there on the edge of the arroyo. Big events were scarce, and, naturally enough, my folks went down with the rest of the town.

"The Paradise gang had rode in early that evening and it was light yet when the fire broke out. It was a habit, then, for everybody to line up on the high side of Main Street and leave the lower side, which was unbuilt, clear. Then, if the Phœnix was running to anybody's fire that the gang did n't like, and they were minded to cut loose, it 'd be all clear for taking a shot at her as she went by. It was bad for the hose," he chuckled.

"Well, old Lazarus owned that fire, and the Paradisers cut loose, plenty. Hardly a spoke there now but what 's bullet-creased, and that 's the third set of wheels that 's been about shot out from under that machine. But, all of us who were trying to make a town worth while had patience, mostly, till that evening.

"Axel Neilson had rode over from off of the *mesa*, that afternoon, and had his big pinto horse standing in front of the drug-store. So, he come loping down the street to meet us, when the bell rung, and looped up his lariat as he come. When he met up with us he just wheeled and dropped his loop under the hook of this tongue here, and took a half-hitch around the horn of his saddle, with about seven yards of rope out, all on the canter. Then he spurred away ahead of some fifteen of us fellows that were pulling on the tongue and pushing behind the carriage.

"When we were going good, and curving around the post-office, which had been started on blocking for a new location and was then standing in the middle of Main Street, one of them Paradisers jumped onto his pony and slung a rope around the Phœnix and then side-jumped and stood his horse, like throwing a steer.

"Well, of course you see what happened, quick. The Phœnix turned turtle, and about a dozen of us with her, into the gutter and then over onto the board-walk, amongst the rest of the Paradisers that were all busy taking a shot at the Phœnix as she rolled over. But, what finished my patience was the sight of Bill Amsler fanning his gun along with the outsiders, and my wife and Mrs. Sones hurrying away, good and scared, while they examined a hole that was fresh shot through the top of my wife's bonnet. That was getting a little too close home. Bill had to be reduced.

" I got up and started for Bill, meaning to talk or pound some sense into him, but, with his gun empty and no belt on, he saw me coming and did n't wait. He made tracks and pulled his freight for Greaser Town, across the arroyo. I knew what that meant, and I thought we might as well settle with Bill then as whenever. He had good legs then and he made right fair running. But, I ain't so crippled up, even yet. So, after I 'd got a Winchester out of the drug-store, I trailed over soon enough to see him, with a full belt of cartridges, loping out of Mexican José's 'dobe and up the slope towards the graveyard; but too far off, just then, for a snapshot.

" That 's the place over yonder," said Enderby with a brief lifting of his hand toward a bleak and broken enclosure upon the mountain-side. " Some smart Easterner called it ' Chihuahua-on-the-Hill '; and the fool name stuck.

" You see the place is some hilly, and with the wide board running around the base of the picket fence, it made fair sort of hiding to shoot from in a pinch, and Bill generally made for there when he was pushed or just beginning to hatch devilment. That 's how I knew in the beginning that we had to get him.

" Well, it was coming dusk and I got a little too anxious, on account of his doing that mean shooting and all that. Result was, I come out of the arroyo exposed, when he was getting in behind the fence. He put a glance shot along the barrel of my rifle just as I was about to unhook her. His ball split my left arm from wrist to elbow, light-like, but it spoiled my first shot and sent it 'way wild.

" He got too sure then, Bill did. Laying on his stomach, he give a shout of victory and crossed his legs up behind his back, like for a fancy shot, soon as I 'd show out of the arroyo again. It 's the sure things that 's most uncertain in this world, and Bill 's never got that shot made yet.

"While I was squeezing up my arm some, he forgot his legs were sticking up behind the pickets in full view, and not wanting to get him outright, anyhow, I thought it was better judgment to take what I could see than to guess at what was down behind the board.

"That 's when Bill lost the leg, and that 's how. Soon as my .45 soft-nose reached him he let out a yell that wa' n't no shout of victory and chucked his gun over the fence into the trail, in token of peace. I picked it up and helped him into town, and Doc. Maxon shortened him up sufficient; but he ain't been friendly, much, nor frisky, since, and he 's never raided the shops nor roundhouse, far as I know. He 's liable to bust out though, some day when the bell rings. Bill 's never been exactly what you could call amiable."

Joe seemed very thoughful as they arose and left the little building, and when they had reached the corner of the plaza in silence, they halted and looked, for a moment, into one another's eyes. There was a something that Harper read from Enderby's face, telling him that in and under this all lay his first opportunity for close actual contact with and control of men, in variety and in considerable numbers; and that Enderby so intended it.

"Can we do it?" asked Joe, in honest doubt.

"We can," Enderby answered, in a way that carried conviction. "I know the *alcalde's* views. He wants it done. Will you take chief, and us older fellows back you?"

"If you say so," replied Joe, very quietly.

"There 'll be a public meeting called for this evening.

The shop band plays in the plaza to-night, anyway. There 'll be more or less of Paradise up here, and we might as well let them see that we 're growing.

"You be here, and you 'll sure be elected. *Adios!*" said Enderby in conclusion, and moved on leisurely homeward.

CHAPTER XXII

MAXON'S RETURN

TWO months of brilliant weather, soft, almost, as springtime, followed close upon the rough night when, out of gratitude and humanity, Maxon became a volunteer, in Harmony Canyon. The whimsical winter gods of New Mexico were favoring the doctor. He was heard from at intervals and in the first green of spring he came down off the spur and briefly met the general manager, westward bound, at Villa Rica. He wanted to go East, he said, with scant preliminary, and leave Tom as surgeon in fact, if Sharer would consent. Sharer, questioning mildly, protesting much, accepted his resignation, finally, to save him from becoming a squaw-man, he said; but there was a light in his eyes that told of deeper feeling.

"The Indian? Oh, yes. He got along," Maxon said with a far-away look in response to Sharer's question, and said no more at the time.

The evening they went East together, upon Sharer's return from the coast, they sat in the car at Villa Rica Junction waiting to couple onto the California express, saying little until Sharer, who had been looking narrowly at Maxon's abstracted face, said: "Tell it, Maxon, tell it. Just went up there a few miles into the cactus and rang for hot water and towels, I suppose. Nothing to it but smallpox. Lived high, did n't you? Where are the Navajos?"

"Yes," said Maxon slowly. "Yes, lived high, rather.

Sharer, I have been questioning whether I should tell it. And, passing that, I doubt whether I can, but for you I will try.

" The Indians are on a little river ranch at Algodones. At least I left them there this morning, and they promised to try it a year before back-tracking to the Ortiz. They bought it yesterday, ranch, ponies, and cattle. Ask George to bring my gripsack, will you?

" I was tired of my own thinking, my routine. The actual labor of the going, the foolhardiness, if you like, the hardship, offered a welcome relief from my loneliness among people since my Ruth is gone. It was rough enough to satisfy all that, the night I went up," he continued, " but most of it we travelled under the shelf-rock of the canyon. I found their shack, large enough in a pinch and fairly sheltered, on one of the higher benches of the Big Ortiz. Half lean-to and half cave under the cliff, we kept it fairly warm until the freeze-up passed.

" When I got to him he was wild with fever and reeking with the pest. I bound him down and trained the woman to parry his struggles, while I went the rounds of his awful body. A hundred times I broke his blackened lips apart and as often drained his livid eyes. There is nothing, living or dead, that compares with it, and the memory of it is little better.

" But he got along and we saved his eyes. When he understood it all he was so grateful that I felt ashamed of the little I had really been able to do. The indelible blue notch between the eyes, from that lump of coal at Harmony, shows savage as a spear-point in the odd pallor of his marred brown face, but he is white all through no less.

" Clear water from the rocks was plentiful up on the mountain and coal and wood are there for the taking. I built a stone fire-place and Lota packed provisions up from Harmony, where they were set out for her by my order. Altogether, we fared very well.

"When at last I got him peeled to normal size — peeled is the word, Sharer, nothing else approaches it — got him bathed and on the road to new life, all that could not be cleared up with formaldehyde was burned with the shack, and I decided to loaf a while and invite my soul.

"Facing south, cut into the yellow cliff, high above the old shack, is a well-preserved cliff-dwelling, so sunny and spacious that I asked why they had not lived in it. There was no answer ready and I did not ask again, but we rigged it up and finished our stay in it.

"Once out in the sun again, he thrived like a mesquite and soon was becoming supple and restive. As we sat one sunny noon-day, not long ago, enjoying the wild beauty of canyon and crags, the lower slopes blazing here and there with crimson cypress and purple larkspur, the heights and depths thrilling with the mystery and the hushed voices of the wild — you know the feel of it — Sancho followed with his eyes the flight of a gay red tanager along the yellow wall of the canyon into the green cedars, then turning to me, said softly: 'Him alone, you alone. You sick here,' placing his hand upon his breast. 'Squaw gone, papoose gone. You come. Go see papoose. You come,' he said, and rising, went into the old dwelling.

"He thrust his arm into a cranny of the rock wall and held toward me the handles of a pair of wide-bladed knives. For the moment I thought he had gone back to fever, but looking steadily into his eyes I saw no menace there.

"'One,' he said, as I hesitated.

"I took a knife. He turned to Lota, who was weaving a blanket in quiet unconcern, and said '*Paso.*' She arose and pushed aside a blanket that draped the back wall, thrust back with her foot a wedge of rock upon the floor, and at a touch of Sancho's shoulder a section of the low back wall rolled slowly into an unnoticed narrow opening in the corner of the side wall.

"Used as I am to unexpected doings, the result stunned me. Sharer, you are of those who believe that within sight of these car windows are the proofs of a civilization as mysterious, as rich in interest and quite as old as that of known Egypt. If you did not believe that I could not bring myself to say to you what followed the rolling of the stone. In place of the flat rock whose legends I had previously tried to read from its crudely chiselled figures, there was an oriel through the thin wall of the mountain, circular, and large as the span of a man's extended arms. The Indian stepped through and stood upon the brink in the bay of rock on the other side, scanning the black sides of a great gorge that lay revealed. The change from light to dark, from sunny yellow to frowning black, was as though one suddenly looked through a wide, unwinking eye, into the unmeasured depths of the earth. Among the black basaltic walls that rose to giddy heights, there was no visible opening except above, and far below lay a floor of cloud that hid a muttering torrent. A single tawny point of rock, high to the left, held the only semblance of relief from the appalling grandeur of the dark picture, and high upon the top of a cone of rock in the centre of the abyss a vulture sat, motionless as the tip of a spire.

"With clutching hand and narrowed eyes, the Indian glided backward through the opening and grasped my rifle from its nook. Standing in the open circle, he levelled it for an instant, and the sharp crash of the gun multiplied into a volley of echoes, as the tawny rock-cap sprang into the air and hurtled, end over end, into the depths and through the vapory floor of the gorge, with the piercing yell of a wounded cougar. The vulture leaped and dived, swift and straight, into the depths, and through the vapor, and then the black gorge showed nothing living.

" 'We go,' said the Indian, replacing the gun and stepping again into the giddy oriel. I followed. Now, I wonder why, but I followed and I 'm glad of it, Sharer.

" He led me for an hour through paths that Satan must have etched into the sides of that basaltic cliff, but many soft-shod feet have trodden them smooth in the long ago. Once, for a moment, *sorroche*, the mountain sickness, turned me empty and faint and I flattened, face in, toward the rock. He instantly thrust his body between me and the brink, and the contact nerved me to go on. I have clutched that rock in my sleep since then and once yelled lustily, they tell me.

" At the last, a narrow fissure, scarce two yards in breadth, split the black wall before us raggedly to the top. So deep that, looking down, there was only blackness, and, high above, the stars shone clear in the mid-afternoon. Upon the lip of this fissure Sancho stopped and drew his knife, the mate of which I carried. Then I mistrusted that his race spirit had come uppermost and that he had darkly reasoned that I should be happier, and perhaps his secret safer, if he returned alone. And looking into the bottomless crevasse, I wondered what lapse of judgment had led me on.

" But with only a moment's halt, he leaped the yawning gap and clung upon a point of rock no wider than your desk. He fumbled, head-high, at the face of the rock, until the broad blade of his knife was forced in down to the hilt, and left its strong handle projecting like a peg from the rock. Then he turned and said, as at starting:

"'You come!'

"He grasped the knife-handle and clung to the rock while he swung around a projection, and was gone from view, into the big fissure.

"The knife-handle still stuck from the rock, and I stood stupidly staring at it, alone and ashamed. I knew then that I carried a knife by courtesy only. My knife was not needed.

"Again his voice came, hollowly, saying: 'You come.' And, Sharer, somehow the spell of it was on me and, trembling like a dog, I went. I leaped it, clung, and died a dozen deaths in that moment, and in the next, stood with Sancho behind the rock-point in the wall of the fissure. He was already on his knees, fumbling at a pile of broken quartz and porphyry, and then I thought I was sure of his quest.

"From an under-cut which he uncovered in the rock, he took a score of smooth hardwood sticks of graded lengths, which he assorted carefully. The shortest he dropped first, across the fissure, into niches that were hewn into the walls. Then, standing upon that slender rung, he added and climbed, one by one, returning, until, with the placing of the last, he remained above. From the ledge upon which he stood concealed, some twenty feet above me in the dusky light, he said again:

"'You come!'

"I scaled that bending gossamer of ladder with my eyes upon the stars overhead, and they, twinkling in the blue above, were hardly more superb than the sparkling wealth that laid upon that shelf of rock."

"Laid?" said Sharer tensely.

"Yes," said Maxon. "It was gathered in little mounds before a sun-god, rough-hewn in the living black rock, with great eyes of blue and gold, smiling grotesquely from the shadows of the big niche. The hall-marks of ancient Mexican royalty, great tufts of quetzal plumes, swaying idly above it in the clear dry air that swirls in from the fissure, told the story of Sancho's defection from the ancient faith. It would go badly with him, Sharer, if that were to become known among his people. He, it is certain, is not Navajo."

Maxon smoked in quiet intentness for a few moments, and then said:

"Go if he will take you, but I would not again."

He took from the gripsack at his side a big oval of beautiful blue and gold to which clung rough points of gray rock, and handed it to Sharer, saying:

"Keep this. If ever a more lowering sky is yours, this may help to bring back to you the blue of New Mexico's sky and the golden light of its sunshine.

"I shipped enough of it to Denver to make the Indians comfortable and gave them the money last week. They pressed upon me more than a railroad surgeon is likely to possess. And now I am going home, to play with my children's children, after a while, I hope, till the sun goes down.

"'Once a man and twice a boy,' eh, Sharer?" he added, and laughed to hide his sadness, like the great, kindly boy he is at heart.

"All of us," said Sharer musingly, as he turned the precious lobe of blue and gold idly round and round. "All of us, Maxon, every one."

When the California express went east that night, Dodson, in the big ten-wheeler at the front, perched up behind the broad shaft of electric light that swayed and raced on before the engine, now on the fringe of the river, and now under the swaying cottonwoods that waved wide arms across the track, saw a white-turbaned head thrust out from behind the adobe wall of a ranch-house close to the track, near Algodones; saw it vanish when the light dashed upon it, and thought no more of it. When they at the rear end flashed by, however, there was a mute parting of friends.

A pine torch rose and fell and rose again against the adobe wall. Maxon, rising quickly from his chair by the rear window, swung the curtained car door wide, once and again, letting out a double flood of light, in answer, then turned away with smarting eyes.

When the Mississippi valley awakes from winter, and the orioles are swinging among the first golden green of the old St. Louis elms, a sunny-faced old man sometimes sits placidly in his favorite nook, not far from Vandeventer Place, and rules the gambols of a merry throng of little men and women. But oftenest there is with him a little woman of five, or thereabout, whose eyes are as blue as forget-me-nots and whose sunny curls shimmer with gold.

"Lota," he playfully calls her. And again, when her fancy has decked her in a flowing train of rare old chrome red and yellow and black, which she catches up from his knee, he says: "My little Navajo!" as she sweeps by, and his smiling eyes have a dreamy depth, as Maxon plays till the sun goes down.

CHAPTER XXIII

MAKING A CHIEFTAIN

ENDERBY, on the evening of the confab at the hose-house, seeing Abe Hazard, town marshal, standing at the drug-store corner, took that turn in his homeward course, after parting with Harper. When he left Hazard, a few minutes later, the stocky little marshal drawled:

"Sure. I 'll go up to the house an' git my other gun."

"You tell the *alcalde* that I 'm set on having this to-night," said Mark, "and that you and me will steer things. But ring the bell slow and peaceable and don't get things stirred up too much at the start. When the pinch comes, we can hold them with the band."

So, it came about that when the stars were looking steadily down upon the plaza with its throng of vari-colored faces pressing in about the flaring lights of the little band-stand, the pretty closing strains of "*La Fandango del Agua Blanca*" were followed by the musical call of the bell. Very guardedly the first stroke rang, and echoed away against the cliff. When the instant shuffle of the crowd and the sound of scurrying horses' feet upon the rim of the throng had quieted to a questioning murmur, the company call was regularly taken up by the old bell.

"One! One-two-three!" it rang, again and again, until the people, silent for the most part, filled the little plaza.

Then, following the lead of Enderby, Harper, and Abe Hazard, from the fire-shed, they swayed back toward the band-stand, and pressed close to it, as before. Mounting the short flight of steps the three men advanced upon the platform, and at a motion from Hazard, the band instruments were lowered.

"Get action on it, Abe," advised Enderby, in a whisper, and Hazard went to the railing where the crowd was densest. Slowly, he hitched up his belt with the indescribable twist that only a seasoned frontiersman or a soldier can accomplish gracefully.

"Men of Alta Vista," spoke Hazard, "an' I see a few friends from Paradise has rid in —"

"You bet! Rah fer Paradise!" yelled a rider on the fringe of the crowd and spurred his horse into a curveting buck-jump, that brought forth a stifled cheer, and drew half-a-dozen other galloping horsemen after him. They circled the edges of the crowd and came back with a swoop to the starting point. Unmoved, Hazard waited until the little cavalcade came to a spectacular halt in the outer rim of light from the band-stand.

"That 'll be all right about Paradise," he then announced slowly, "an' we 're glad to have the folks from down that way with us showin' life an' action. But we don't have no more time fer them amusements this evenin'.

"We 're here to begin reorg'nizin' the town fire-comp'ny an' I 'm dep'tized by the *alcalde* to say his say, him not bein' able to be present in person. I ther'fore offer, as givin' the sense o' this meetin', our friend an' ex-chief o' the Alta Vista fire-department, Mark Enderby. He knows my sentiments. Mr. Enderby will talk to you," he concluded with a jerk of his thumb in Mark's direction, after a searching glance at the Paradise out-riders.

"Got a gun?" Mark asked hastily of Joe while Hazard was talking. Before Joe could reply Mark cautioned in undertones, " Don't show any. We 've got plenty, here and scattered through the crowd, and you 're to be the emblem of peace this evening."

" You people of Alta Vista — and Paradise — know me well enough, I reckon," said Enderby, taking his stand beside Hazard. " I 've done my best by this town, one way and another, going and coming, times I 'm not on the road, and always will, according to my lights.

" The marshal has put the business of this meeting, and what we most need now, having the hose-carriage and the fire-house, is a new chief. Time was when there was disagreements and some signs of bad feeling during the workings of the company, but such emotions, we expect, have passed with time gone."

" Oh, I don' know," spoke an unfriendly voice from the centre of the crowd, and Bill Amsler's flushed face stretched higher above the throng and his right shoulder heaved slowly above the level. " There 's folks in this town that needs to be lots more keerful with the'r shootin', an' the'r talkin' in times o' public interest."

" Right for you, neighbor," replied Enderby, without venom. " It 's well and timely said. This left arm of mine is stiffening more than is comfortable, as time gets farther from the hide-house burning. But I ain't carrying any ill feelings that can't be covered under the stamp of that leg of yours. So let 's let it go as it lays and continue the times of peace."

A murmur of approval ran through the gathering, which was well leavened with railroad men. Amsler's shoulder went down and he edged into the lesser light of the group and subsided.

"There is here," said Enderby, "a young man, Joe Harper, that some of you know and some of you don't. I guarantee him to stand or run with the company according to the town's needs, and I put him in nomination for chief. Are there any other candidates?"

"Ther' is not," said Abe Hazard promptly. "All in favor o' makin' this here election unanimous just speak up an' say so now."

If there was objection offered it was lost in the affirmative shout of friends, and in the single blare of the band that came with suspicious timeliness. Before Joe could fully grasp the fact of his election, there were calls — both friendly and jeering, for a speech, and he was standing at the rail in front of Hazard and Enderby.

"Make your play, Joe. You need n't say much," prompted Mark, aside, "but be careful what you say."

Joe flushed as he surveyed the serious-faced gathering and felt the intensity of the fires of life that burned there. He saw, as never before, how narrow was the span of years to which Enderby had referred as separating the town from its own more primitive days. Then he stiffened, with a flash of his gray eyes, and spoke.

"I want to live here," he began abruptly. "I like it and want to help. I am obliged to you for the office of chief. Other officers, I am told, will be elected, but it will all amount to nothing unless everybody helps.

"To promote good feeling, I propose that we take out the hose-cart, now, and invite the boys from Paradise to hitch on and join us in a parade, up Main Street and back to the plaza. Let us head up with Marshal Abe Hazard, Mark Enderby, Bill Amsler, and the band. Are there any objections to the idea?"

Something between a growl and a groan broke from Enderby and Hazard, but the thing was done.

"Pardner, ther' is," said a mountaineer who had been standing close in front of Joe.

As he spoke, the man laid the blue muzzle of a big revolver on the second rail of the band-stand. The upturned bore stared threateningly into Joe's astonished face, and swayed only enough to cover Hazard and Enderby, at his side.

"Ther' is objections. An' I give notice that if I 'm gun-covered, back 'er front, before the p'int 's settled, you 're sure covered, an' ther 's others covered. I advise fer peace."

There came the deadly rustling swish of guns steathily leaving holsters, but not a hammer clicked. The thing was too complete and deadly as it stood. Joe stood transfixed and gazing vacantly down into the big muzzle. His ruddy cheeks slowly turned white and his nostrils tightened noticeably. Then, suddenly, the color surged back into his face and he did something that has cost many a man his life, in like position. He smiled.

But this was a pervasive, friendly smile that took in the gun and the gunner and those beyond him. Joe saw the softened reflection of his own face in the faces below him, as they relaxed. He had arrived at the other man's point of view, and it conjured a picture that made him smile, even into the muzzle of the gun.

"Are you from Paradise?" he quietly asked of the man.

"I am," said the man with the gun.

"I think you are right to object," said Joe steadily. "State your point, but lower the gun. I have none anyway, and if we were on the engine it would look to me like heading into a tunnel, just now, with the far end closed."

A gritty sort of laugh rippled through the crowd, but mixed with it was the dull thud of steel in leather, as unseen guns went back into hidden holsters.

Enderby breathed a sigh of relief and said, low, to Hazard: "It 's all right now. Hold steady."

"The p'int is," said the man, as he looked closely at Mark and Hazard and allowed the muzzle to slip below the rail, "that as long as we got to come up here from Paradise to Alta Vista, visitin' an' the like, we don't keer to be insulted an' worked up no more by indecent messages onto public vehicles; not while they 's a gun to shoot. But, we 're wantin' peace, as I announced."

"The neighbor from Paradise refers, I believe, to some inscriptions on the rear of the hose-carriage, with which you are probably all familiar," announced Joe in quiet seriousness. "Considering ourselves in committee of the whole, I would move you that the offensive lettering be at once removed, and that we then proceed with the parade. Will somebody second that motion?"

"I second the motion. The man is wrong with his gun, which we fergive, an' he 's right with his p'int, which we all applaud," said Hazard promptly. "This is a meetin' fer peace."

"Question!" said Enderby, heartily.

"You have heard the motion, gentlemen. All in favor, signify by saying 'Aye,'" Harper responded promptly.

The shout of "Ayes" that went up was whipped to a crescendo of "Yip-yip-yee's" from a shadowy line of circling Paradise horsemen, and a volley of high-aimed guns, that gave Alta Vista almost the vim of a cow-town in jubilee. Then the throng broke and headed for the hose-house.

That night Alta Vista, along Main Street and the plaza, saw a new sight. Following the valiant shop-band, Abe

Hazard, Bill Amsler, Mark Enderby, and the protesting Citizen from Paradise, four abreast, and afoot, led a small platoon of Paradise horse that drew the "Phœnix of Alta Vista" with half-a-dozen lariats. Harper, hoisted by friendly hands, rode the hose-carriage with the dilapidated eagle, and two-by-two the crowd brought up the rear. What Enderby had called "that insulting sentiment" had vanished under a bar of fresh shale-red paint, and all was peace and good will.

It was a joyful mood of Alta Vista, and the enlivening strains of "The Dance of the White Water" again fared forth, but now mingled with the jubilant crash of guns that had not been heard since the night of the hide-house fire. The far sounds and echoes of it survived after the Paradise delegation had galloped away into the night and the "Phœnix" was safely housed and the plaza lights were out. The "Phœnix," for once, had gone proudly unscathed.

When Enderby, Hazard, and Amsler had talked out their peace pow-wow at the drug-store and were about to separate for home, Mark ventured an opinion:

"I expect there's something big in a young fellow who can start up a thing as bristly as that was for a few minutes, and then throw and tie it, without getting himself or anybody else hurt."

"Ther' is," said Amsler.

"You bet!" said Hazard.

The reorganization of the fire-company and the practice runs in convenient afternoons and evenings went on, with increasing interest and enthusiasm, during the summer. It was not until a pleasant evening in early September that the results of Enderby's coaching and Joe's generalship were put to the test. On that day, all trains had come through on time and the town was serene, but very much alive with the making up of trains and the home-coming of crews. Nearly a full fire-company could have been mustered just before José Alvarez Conquistador Rodriguez precipitated a crisis. Oddly enough, it was this "Yellow Conk," whose spasmodic enthusiasm had won for him the distinction of being the only Mexican in the company, who brought about its undoing.

Much of the mild sunny afternoon he had reclined dreamily against a packing-case on the freight house platform. His sleepy eyes saw dimly, when at all, the chortling switch engines that untiringly backed and filled cars into trains in the yard before him. There was nothing to be anxious about. The engines were for the working. Why not, then, the *siesta?*

Finally, when the yards were quieting down and the echoes fell fewer from the Rim Rock Cliff, "Conk" arose and yawned luxuriously. His left hand searched out tobacco while his right found paper, and slowly he rolled a cigarette. Properly moistened, it hung at a careless angle from his lips, as he indolently surveyed the crowded yards and with much deliberation twirled a match between thumb and finger.

Canting his high conical hat, with its brave filigree band and bell-buttoned brim, to a more soothing angle above his eyes, he lifted one graceful corduroyed leg, gazed far away across the sunny reaches of the open, and struck the match with a languid sweep. A slow smile spread over his lazy, handsome face, as he expelled the first deep inhalation of fragrant smoke, and tossed the glowing match-stem over his shoulder.

Buena! Ah, it was good!

It was good and, so being, Conquistador, the immortal, was in the next moment gathered unto his fathers, as a shivering boom struck and shuddered back from the cliff, and poor "Conk," the mortal, was scattered wide upon the yards, leaving little but the unresistant sombrero, with its now pitiful little bells, and the splintered and spattered freight house to mark his exit. The heavy box of explosive had been marked plainly enough, but not upon the side where "Conk" had dreamed the sunny hours away.

The freight house was flaming and a great white pall of the powder smoke hung in level folds, high above it, when the old bell sent out its hurried alarm upon the still air. Harper, with many others of his patiently drilled company, came promptly to the work. Fleet and strong, they ran the distance bravely, amid cheers. Deftly, the agile pipeman dropped off at the plug. The reel spun out the well-kept hose, and the hose-cart was thrust into an outer angle of the burning building — and forgotten.

So sure were they of their skill that Joe straightened and waved the signal for water, before the nozzle was screwed into place. The long line of hose leaped and bellied and writhed under the hurtling rush of the heavy head of water, and they grouped anxiously over the big nozzle. The nozzle jammed, cross-threaded, and locked itself hopelessly askew, just when Enderby broke through the close circle of men about it and joined Joe and his lieutenants. With a heavy chug, the water struck the last sharp kink in the hose and lifted, then stretched, Joe and his group of helpers, like tumbled nine-pins, around the feet of Enderby.

Then the freed nozzle raised and struck like a living thing, at Mark. He went down, bruised and stunned, upon the shattered group. Once more, the nozzle raised and struck a sounding blow upon the muddy mass of them and then it fell clear of the gushing hose. A moment more and the rout was complete. The over-anxious pipeman, watching the nozzle signals, had wrenched the plug-screw down heedlessly until it burst the bottom from the only available plug. It was a sorry group that the townsfolk and the remainder of the company pulled from the little pool in which they lay with the nozzleless hose pouring a weak and gulping stream of muddy water among the fallen ones.

"It 's bad," said Enderby, as they helped him to the drug-store, "but don't you mind too much, boys. Things are happening all the time, you know, and always will be, more or less."

"But the freight house is gone," gritted Joe between his teeth, and, much to his own surprise, tears of anger and mortification ran freely down his muddy face.

"Yes," said Enderby, "and the Phœnix is gone. She burned with the rest of it. But you tried, did n't you?"

"Yes, tried; but what a try!" groaned Joe, with a backward glance at the smouldering mass by the tracks.

Thinking over it all, however, at his later leisure — the reorganization, the wider, closer contact with men, the attempts at discipline, the success and the glaring failure — Enderby felt that his main purpose had been served.

Harper had grown, by so much, in a general knowledge of men and of himself. And when, in the year that followed, Yates, superintendent of motive power, went, almost without warning, to his end, and Dinwiddy was moved up along the line of promotion, Enderby looked with confidence upon Harper's advancement to a minor executive position and knew, with a quiet content, that Harper's further course lay wide beyond Alta Vista.

Some years have gone since then, yet not so many, all in all, and Enderby, having satisfied his desire to make a few ripples in the railroad freight pool, before definitely conceding that his engine-running days were done, now contentedly bears a hand in the thriving affairs of Alta Vista, as one of its honored city fathers. Very often, he is found seated near the door of a spick and span, new brick fire-engine house, above the door of which a bird of wonderful design in gilt and bronze mounts guard over the neatly lettered legend:

"Phœnix Company: No. 1."

There Sharer, who still fares, occasionally, to and fro across the mountains, from lake to ocean, found Enderby, not long ago, watching the antics of a team of young fire horses as they galloped in practice with a glistening apparatus, which had little resemblance to the "Phœnix" of other days.

"Remember Harper, don't you, Sharer?" Enderby presently asked, in the course of their friendly chat, aside.

"Oh, yes," replied Sharer promptly. "I have never lost sight of him, in fact."

A shade of disappointment passed over his face, but that was speedily swept away in a reminiscent look of satisfaction. Perhaps the consciousness of a full confirmation of his own earlier judgment of Harper helped, as a solace for the repeated failure of his plan to train his own successor; once in the instance of his own son, Dave, and again in the case of Harper, who had long since become as a son to him, but had left the old road for newer fields.

"Read that, Dave," continued Enderby, as he handed out a letter bearing the name of a great railroad which was not of Sharer's making, although closely allied.

On the letter-head, Joe's name is high among the topmost, and chief of them all is the name of the father of the prodigal son, whom Harper one time headed homeward. But the letter was almost boyish, pleading, in its familiar phrasing. It ran:

"*Dear old Partner:*

"Are you there, I wonder, and is it still well with you all?

"I hear of Alta Vista, often, as a city growing, and, once or twice of late, I have heard of you through the boys who scattered from there. But you will not write — or you would not — and I am wanting the sight of you to-day somehow, in surprising fashion.

"You may see from this letter that it is as you once said to me: 'Some must go beyond the timber-line of the crowd, while some must work at tide-water.'

"And some, good friend, like you, stay long upon the sunny slopes and make the rest of us possible.

"I suspect that I may have been above timber-line too long, as you would say, and that I am consequently a trifle chilled. Write me, will you not, for the once, and send me the feel of Alta Vista?

"JOE."

"The boy 's tired; just plumb tired," nodded Enderby, with emphasis, as he returned the letter to his pocket and drew forth another which he did not at once unfold.

"Yes," said Sharer, understandingly. "He is tired. But, he is elastic, very, and he will rebound."

"I wrote him, t' other day," continued Enderby, "and told him that we 're a city that has no equal of its size. I told him that our old hen has a brood of chickens — that 's the kind of things he needs to know about now — and that the birds are nesting and singing, and the posies a-blooming in the Water Canyon, same as of old; and that you can see as far as ever from our front porch, over to the *mesa.*

"And I said further to him that the Phœnix has come up again, finer than ever, from her own ashes — or from somewheres else," he interjected, with a slow smile, "and that he 's to come out here this coming summer and we 'll meet him with the band, and turn out the new company, and give him the town. Or, we 'll muzzle it up still and quiet for him, as to such doings; whichever he wants. And this is what he says," glowed Mark, in conclusion.

Sharer took the proffered letter, with a smile at sight of the familiar letter-head and signature, and read:

"*Dear old Mark:*

"I am coming, in the summer, back to where, I sometimes think, I got my first real discipline, and where, surely, I first tasted the wholesome bitterness of defeat.

"I want to see the new Phœnix, and the other birds, and things generally. I will risk the band, but if the fire company is no better than the one I drilled, please set a close guard around the freight house, before you turn the boys loose.

"JOE."

"When we get that car of his into Alta Vista yard, we 'll just set the clock back five years, or so, for him, the first day, and more to follow. That 's what he 's needing. He sure never forgot Alta Vista. None of the boys do," said Enderby, proudly, as he pocketed the letter.

"'Moreover,' as Halpin says when he spills the valve oil, moreover, Harper has a boy coming seven years old. They have saddled him with the name of 'Joe Enderby

Harper '— like as not you 've heard about that — and, taking that with some other growing responsibilities, I 've sort of planned it out to make a little roundup of the rising generation, when Harper and his wife get here with the boy.

" You see, Sharer, with Johnnie Parry's two busy young scamps coming up here, once in a while, from Villa Rica; with young Mark Dodson McPeltrie — that 's our Ruth's boy — coming eight years and living next door to us; and with Willie Dodson and Muller's little Dan not far away, I 've just had to talk and keep a-talking.

" ' Naturally,' as Dodson says when he 's unnaturally trying to bluff McPeltrie, just naturally, with the eagles circling and calling up yonder on the Rim Rock, and the trout leaping and shining, betimes, in the Geyser Water — why, I 've told the youngsters some mighty big tales of what we 'd do, some time, but none bigger than the truth, and I 've got to make good this summer. They are plaguing me to show them.

" So, I 've sort of figured out a schedule for these delayed runs, and I 'm to be despatcher, engineer — the whole works, except motive power — and that last will be burros.

" I wish you were going with us, Dave."

Sharer, turning with a wistful smile back to the passing glory and the cruel grind of the transportation mill to which he has bound himself and from which, apparently, he is unable long to escape, replied briefly:

" Much obliged, Enderby. So do I. There seems to be a lively time not very far ahead! "

Enderby, deep-set in the ways of peace and contentment, which the trying years have made only more sure, smilingly answered:

" It seems mighty likely."

THE END

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